

# A General Picture of Doubt

Davidson, instability and the progression of language

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## 1 Introduction

There is good reason to hesitate when confronted with Richard Rorty's assertion that "We never understand anything except under a description, and there are no privileged descriptions."<sup>1</sup> It is counter-intuitive. There are, certainly, true statements, ways of getting things right, that only surface against a background of getting things wrong? The true must be privileged over the false and this privilege must provide the means by which we can choose between them. Does this denial of privilege help Rorty counter, as he wishes it to, the dominant western belief "that the paradigm of achieving greater understanding is modern science's increasing grasp of the nature of the physical universe- a universe that is not language"?<sup>2</sup> He continues the statement on description thus:

There is no way of getting behind our descriptive language to the object as it is in itself – not because our faculties are limited but because the distinction between 'for us' and 'in itself' is a relic of a descriptive vocabulary, that of metaphysics, which has outlived its usefulness.<sup>3</sup>

Within the ideological west, we believe that science does just what Rorty denies, that it "cuts nature at the joints," allowing us access to knowledge of how things *really* are. The key word in Rorty's description of the dominant paradigm is 'grasp'. Science, if anything, must be inquiry that uncovers and grasps truth, the nature of the "object as it is in itself." But Rorty is also in agreement with Donald Davidson that "we can never know which of our beliefs are true," thus casting structural doubt on the very *belief* in western scientific methodology. Any emphasized use of 'real' is positioned as metaphysical and so the discussion should shift its attention to the role of belief, truth and description and away from question begging assumptions that define our understanding of the real and true as independent of human endeavor.

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<sup>1</sup> Rorty Richard, "Being that can be understood is language: Richard Rorty on H.G. Gadamer", *London Review of Books*, Vol. 22 No.6, 16 March, 2000, 23

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

In that this is increasingly counter-intuitive, it can be seen as skirting the edges, if not worse, of irrationality. Commonly understood, an insufficient respect for the truth is irrational. In *Rorty and His Critics*, Akeel Bilgrami chooses the term ‘bullshitter’ for those who do “indeed fail to value truth.”<sup>4</sup> Not liars, or even relativists, he says, but those who do not even try to get things right. Though he does not overtly state Rorty is a bullshitter, it is well known that Rorty has held that there is no way of getting things right, if one means as Bilgrami does, that this demands a greater respect for truth than what the outcomes of descriptive negotiations offer. Ultimately, we don’t have a so very different approach here than within the public debate around the well known Sokal hoax that Bilgrami refers to in supporting his point about valuing truth.

If the point is that, with Rorty and Davidson, the concept of truth does not provide the type of authoritative, epistemological priority that realism would demand, responses that are based on unquestioned necessity for just this definition of truth never get off the ground. Like Bilgrami with his distaste for “bad and sloppy philosophy,”<sup>5</sup> Allen Sokal wants to maintain proper standards for research. His stated rational for publishing his hoax paper, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” in the journal *Social Text* in 1996 was:

to defend what one might call a scientific worldview- defined broadly as a respect for evidence and logic, and for the incessant confrontation of theories with the real world; in short, for reasoned argument over wishful thinking, superstition and demagoguery.<sup>6</sup>

For Sokal, getting a paper published that was merely a nonsensical collection of technical and critical jargon was a political act. He saw himself as fighting the

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<sup>4</sup> Bilgrami, Akeel, “Is Truth A Goal Of Inquiry?: Rorty And Davidson On Truth,” in *Rorty And His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000), 260

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 242

<sup>6</sup> Sokal, Allen, “A Plea for Reason Evidence, and Logic”, in *The Sokal Hoax: The Scam That Shook The Academy*/edited by the editors of *Lingua Franca* (Lincoln: Lingua Franca Books, U. of Nebraska Press, 2000), 249

subjectivist and relativist menace, those who disdain Sokal's (and other hard-nosed thinkers') version of the real world.

But rather than political, this would be better described as ideological. The problem cannot be one of lack of respect for logic or lack of serious inquiry. This charge is better described as a slur or rhetorical attack than a considered engagement. And it would be difficult to defend those accusations against philosophers such as Rorty and Davidson. The problem is 1) that to be reasonable, according to those who fear the relativist menace, can be interpreted to mean the acceptance (at least in some form) the Myth of the Given. Wilfred Sellars has defined the Myth of the Given as:

The idea that there is, indeed *must be*, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be noninferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) such that the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims – particular and general – about the world.<sup>7</sup>

This myth asserts that there is Truth in the world that justifies our facts, the classic realist proposal. The realist takes this to be such a fundamental assumption that any questioning of it amounts to a denial of the real world or some type of post-modern fantasy.

Since this type of blank-slate representationalism is just what is being denied in Rorty's philosophy, there is no meeting of minds on the topic. In this manner, Rorty and those who could be said to agree with him are judged to be, by definition, irrational. At this point any kind of silly counterexample is found to obtain from the identified irrational statements. Thus the discourse is dragged down to a level of name-calling and fallacy that could serve as a textbook study for political argumentative strategy, not reasoned intellectual engagement.

In addition there is 2) a reactive response to uses of language which are seen to threaten realist intuitions, leading to the context of 1). This is clearly exhibited by looking at who it is that comes under attack for such things as undervaluing truth or

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<sup>7</sup> Sellars, Wilfrid, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000) 68-69

making a mockery of the veridical nature of science. A brief glance at the Sokal debate turns up the familiar post-modernist, so-called post-modernist and feminist theoreticians: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Harding, Irigaray. Rorty is also mentioned, and figures prominently as a target of this line of thought elsewhere in the philosophical literature.<sup>8</sup> That continental thinkers have employed difficult language in their writing may or may not be warranted. Complex conceptual connections may well require complex explanations out of necessity, a quality much scientific literature also exhibits. But not choosing formal languages or distinct disciplinary jargon as forms of expression should not lead one to conclude, as the physicist Steven Weinberg does, that “Derrida and other postmoderns do not seem to be saying anything that requires a special technical language, and they do not seem to be trying very hard to be clear.”<sup>9</sup> This common attitude doesn’t seem to express much more than an unwillingness to attempt an understanding of a fellow academic’s writings.

If all of this was truly just a misunderstanding of each other’s fields of research, or perhaps an ignorance of a discipline’s theoretical history, gains could be made through increased and reasoned discussion. For example, in his introduction to Wilfred Sellars’ *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Rorty claims that the lack of familiarity with the history of philosophy among analytic philosophers (and as such, perhaps physicists can be excused) has lead to an undervaluation of Sellars’ work. As if to say, if people were just more literate, we could avoid involving ourselves in so much disagreement. But that is to assume a type of openness to texts and manners of discourse that has already been derailed in the context at hand.

Openness is a virtue that Rorty repeatedly states he values. In his disagreement with Bilgrami’s application of ‘bullshitters,’ he defines them as “being

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<sup>8</sup> These are, of course, examples, not to be taken as the totality of the problem. It is much more pervasive than just what is presented here. Most of the critics of Rorty in *Rorty and His Critics* can be seen to make similar types of rhetorical attacks. And the trench-level of public debate around the Sokal hoax was also re-instigated in Bergen, Norway in 2005 after the award of the Holberg Prize to the French intellectual Julia Kristeva. The issues, and form that the discussion of them takes, does not appear to be changing.

<sup>9</sup> Weinberg, Steven “Sokal’s Hoax” in *The Sokal Hoax: The Scam That Shook The Academy*/edited by the editors of *Lingua Franca* (Lincoln: Lingua Franca Books, U. of Nebraska Press, 2000) 150

unconversable, incurious, and self-absorbed.”<sup>10</sup> For Rorty, being serious just means being willing to join the conversation honestly and earnestly. He continues:

Unconversable people are the ones you cannot talk profitably with on matters of common interest, no matter how hard you try: you are finally forced to conclude that persistent failure to get on the same wavelength is their fault rather than yours.<sup>11</sup>

This desire for open engagement sounds much like Sokal’s desire for reasoned argument. Rorty’s definition also mirrors how Sokal views those *he* himself criticizes. It should be the end of the matter. Rorty draws his conclusions on truth, description and communication from a basis of the reasoned work of other philosophers as to what “incessant confrontation of theories with the real world” could involve. Ostensibly the kind of rigorous engagement everyone claims is desirable. Perhaps, though, it is actually the content of what is being philosophically engaged that is the problem, not the manner in which it is being done. So we should look at whom it is Rorty endorses and what these problematic ideas are.

Among others, Wilfred Sellars, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson figure prominently in Rorty’s philosophical views. Davidson is often named with Rorty due to the latter’s endorsements of Davidson’s work on truth, belief, meaning and communication. What connects them is that they have contributed to a comprehension of language that refutes the Myth of the Given; roughly, the idea that the physical world is sufficient to justify our knowledge claims. Their work, by placing language in a primary position in regard to our ability to know, has led to the assumption by many that they are actually endorsing that the world is not larger than language, and perhaps by extension, that the world is not.

But these philosophers are not idealists or ‘antirealists’. The world is out there, dropping rocks on our heads, getting us wet, and touching our faces with cool spring breezes. Contrary to how their detractors choose to formulate it, what is at stake is not *if*, but *how* we know that the world is doing this, the mechanisms by

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<sup>10</sup> Rorty, Richard, “Response to Daniel Dennet” in *Rorty And His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000) 105

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* 105

which we enjoin experience. For these philosophers, the mechanisms are the public generation and dependency of concepts and language use.

Sellars details concisely in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* that perception requires a conceptual command of language in order for objects to be recognized. This is that one must be able to know the appropriate conditions to state *that* something is the case. In Sellars' words, "one can have the concept of green only by having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element."<sup>12</sup> He goes further to present what he calls psychological nominalism, that "all awareness of abstract entities – indeed, all awareness even of particulars – is a linguistic affair."<sup>13</sup> Since linguistic, so is it public and shared, a point made also by Wittgenstein.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein presents what is commonly termed his "private language argument". This stresses the necessarily public aspect to what are individual, personal experiences. In the discussion of an individual wishing to note the occurrences of a sensation with the sign "S" he questions our ability to get on without language; in that even calling "S" as notation for sensation is to use "a word of our common language, not of one intelligible to me alone." In addition, the attempt to disown the term sensation by saying only that one "has something" to which "S" refers does not in any lesser way involve language since " 'has' and 'something' also belong to our common language."<sup>14</sup> For any description to be understood, even by the individual speaking to herself, entails the ability to use it correctly. And any justification as to getting it right must appeal to the larger community of language users.

"Getting it right" means the same to Rorty. Justification never escapes the language community to something non-human. A recurring point for Rorty is the collapse of the epistemological project as the attempt to anchor our knowledge directly to the world in a way that bypasses our linguistically rooted understanding of it. Highlighting the pragmatist view of use-value as the ultimate grounds for justification, Rorty discards foundationalist goals for knowledge (on the traditional understanding as certainty or justified true belief) and seeks to replace it with hope. He sees hope as an adequate replacement due to it being deeply involved with human

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<sup>12</sup> Sellars 44

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* 63

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, Third edition, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (1953, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) §261, 79<sup>e</sup>



activities such as creativity, discourse and agreement. Activities that he feels are closer to societal goals than the abstract values commonly packed into truth.

Hope, though, is ephemeral. Donald Davidson approaches an analysis of our social practices from a slightly different and more concrete direction, namely communication and interpretation. Rather than reject the objectivity that the foundationalist seeks, Davidson locates it in the interpersonal standards that make communication possible. At the same time, with the triangulation he identifies between a speaker, an interpreter and the world he agrees with Wittgenstein and Rorty about what it means to get it right. He says:

It is this triangular nexus of causal relations involving the reactions of two (or more) creatures to each other and to shared stimuli in the world that supplies the conditions necessary for the concept of truth to have application. Without a second person there is, as Wittgenstein powerfully suggests, no basis for a judgment that a reaction is wrong or, therefore, right.<sup>15</sup>

Truth appears as a basic and necessary concept in the process of interpretation, through the principle of charity. This is to say, that for one to understand what another says, they must deem them on the whole as speaking the truth, otherwise Davidson holds, “we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.”<sup>16</sup> In addition, the meaning of the statements of that rational creature are dependent on an interpreter’s prior and primitive understanding of truth, the concept that enables us to judge what the conditions are that would make the statement true, the shared stimuli of Davidson’s triangle.

But still, there is a lack of satisfaction in this line of thought. Because what is being taken away is the possibility of pointing to a bit of matter and calling that true, independently of anything else. Wittgenstein’s language game, Rorty’s hope, Davidson’s triangulation and the perceived chicken-egg paradox of Sellars’ looks talk all inject the full linguistic context of cognitive relations into the perceptual and communicative act. Where we expect confirmation from the physical world for our

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<sup>15</sup> Davidson, Donald, “Indeterminism and Antirealism” in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) 83

<sup>16</sup> Davidson, Donald, “Radical Interpretation” in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) 137

beliefs and ascription of truth, we find instead the dynamism of interpretation and interpersonal communication. Despite their assertions that our connections with the world are unproblematic, there remains the issue of the world not being larger than what we know of it and that knowing is based on conceptual, linguistic understanding.

It can be sympathized with, then, that they would be interpreted as denying the world was larger than language, that we lose the world and so the possibility of truth due to evidence never rising above language. This returns us to the problematic reactions to counter-intuitive statements such as those discussed above. Even those, such as the philosopher Paul Boghossian, who can accept that this public linguistic construction applies to the statements that are facts, feels the need to switch to talk of “the evidence at one’s disposal”<sup>17</sup> in order to retain a realist intuition. This also reflects the impetus that lies behind Quine’s observation statements, the reports of surface stimuli. The same can be said of when we begin kicking rocks as an argumentative point: kicking rocks as a foundation of our scientific worldview.

The problem of negotiating reactions to ‘relativist’ philosophy, the intuitive vs. counter-intuitive positions, is then, that instead of “incessant confrontation of theories with the real world,” there is an incessant confrontation of *individuals* with the world. Regardless of theory, we maintain that when alone we are in commune with Nature in a direct way. The rhetoric that sparks charges of irrationalism or irresponsibility places public, shared communication in opposition to this classic figure of the scientific explorer who plunges alone into the world and returns with the veridical gifts of Nature. Wittgenstein was closer to this problem with his ascriptions of ‘S’ than Rorty is with talk of vocabulary. Regardless of what we know or how we know it, the world is larger than language, and inquiry is a solitary affair.

It is unacceptable to choose between either the Given, and what could be called its ‘Great Man theory of knowledge’, or a theoretical context that does not reconcile linguistically bound perception with progression of knowledge. Rorty may be “content to admit that that geniuses can never do more than invent some variations

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<sup>17</sup> Boghossian, Paul, “What the Sokal Hoax Ought to Teach Us: The Pernicious Consequences and Internal Contradictions of ‘Postmodernist’ Relativism”, (response), in *The Sokal Hoax: The Scam That Shook The Academy*/edited by the editors of *Lingua Franca* (Lincoln: Lingua Franca Books, U. of Nebraska Press, 2000) 184

on old themes, give the language of the tribe a few new twists,” but this will never relieve the tension between anti-representationalists and those who find such assertions abhorrent. The question is then, how do we begin to resolve this in a manner conducive to further development, instead of further schoolyard posturing? My suggestion is by investigating what Davidson’s triangulation can offer when applied to the misty boundary of the unknown. By offering an explanation of how the unknown becomes known, we will dissolve the seemingly contradictory assertions that surround how comprehensive language is in relation to the physical world.

There is a borderline between what we know and do not know, a progressive front, always expanding. That our language progresses as well as that there exists novel experience can be taken for granted. These are events new to the individual (or to any individual) to which she must relate. This involves, of course, varying degrees of novelty. Resemblance is not difficult to locate and there is little, if anything, in our daily lives that would qualify for not containing aspects of the familiar. New ideas, for example, are couched in known languages, written in books that look and behave like all other books, and are usually presented in relation to accepted ways of thinking.<sup>18</sup> In this manner, the absolutely novel would perhaps not even be perceived, something that could not be experienced due to that there would be no understood context into which it could be placed. Since even an ostensive definition is conceptually and causally bound, it must remain a supposition that there are things that we cannot even point at.<sup>19</sup>

To clarify, the boundary envisioned is not the boundary of the Given itself, as John McDowell speaks of it. McDowell is concerned with what is unlimited in what is thinkable while accepting a constraint from outside of what is thought, the restrictions of the range of what can be. The progression we will be speaking of is the semantic guarantee of the thinkable, while relying upon Davidson’s triangulation to

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<sup>18</sup> Novelty takes a broader relevance here than the ability to understand novel sentence constructions, where I will take Davidson’s explanations of interpretation as satisfactory. Novelty in the form taken, for example, in scientific research, where new phenomena are encountered, is more to the point.

<sup>19</sup> This must refer to the possibility of human knowledge theoretically. On an individual level will there always be knowledge that is entirely outside of the individual’s ability to even say, “There it is”, with the inability of enlightening the designation “it” further. There are, for example, huge areas of scientific research of which I am totally ignorant to the point of not knowing even what they are called.

provide the constraints needed to avoid what McDowell terms “a phobia of idealism,” the fears mentioned above. We can agree with McDowell that the conceptual is (qualifiedly) unbounded while accepting causal, not rational connections to the world if we relate McDowell’s “independence of reality” to communicative intersubjectivity found in Davidson’s triangulation. Triangulation provides constraint “from outside thinking and judging” by committing the individual to general public interpretations of shared stimuli. This is a constraint of the known. What McDowell correctly wants no constraint for is the “thinkable,” the possibility of progression that presses against the boundary of what we do not know.<sup>20</sup>

Progression is not merely the shuffling of words we already have at our disposal, nor just the re-description of events humans have experienced time and again. It treads the frontier of history and personal development. The static picture of what we know, the totality of our current descriptions, is only a starting point. But it is a necessary and inescapable starting point. Novelty is grasped not by plain deliverances of the world, as the myth of the Given would have it, but by the application of familiar descriptions that the novel stimulates. To apply Davidson’s terminology, the occasion of a novel (for the individual) experience involves a concept of the truth conditions of the description of the experience. These truth conditions will be isolated out from the realm of the literal (that to which we ascribe meaning) and applied, to varying degrees of success, to the new situation, thus entertaining the construction of a novel candidate for truth.

It is obvious that the prior concepts brought to bear on comprehension of the novel event are neither equivalent to nor sufficient to fully understand it. The novel involves a remainder in order to be truly new. It is a juxtaposition of literal elements that resists literality: it is metaphor. Metaphor is understood thus as the ascription of meaning to the novel. It would be convenient to call this remainder metaphoric meaning, the entity that philosophers such as Davidson and Rorty deny exists and others such as Max Black or Mary Hesse argue positively for. But our juxtaposition is not the metaphor of rhetoric or the poetic. It is more like an automatic reaction to a condition.

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<sup>20</sup> McDowell, John, *Mind and World* (1994; reprint, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2002) 28

Black helps point us in the right direction in a response to Davidson's *What Metaphors Mean*. In criticizing the speech act approach to metaphor he questions:

It is hard to make sense of what happens when somebody expresses a thought to himself...What then, on Davidson's view is a soliloquizing thinker, using metaphorical language, supposed to be doing? Nudging and provoking himself to pay attention to some covert likeness? But surely he has already done so?<sup>21</sup>

Black brings our attention to the very *why* of metaphor. If it is not a colorful embellishment to our descriptions, or even an attempt, as analogy, to help another understand what we mean, why not use the defined and well formulated: the literal? In this context we can answer because the literal does not reach as far as the novel, that any paraphrasing within such experiencing fails to suffice.

Instead of focusing on the existing debate on metaphoric verses literal meaning, we will focus on a placement of metaphor prior to the (self)conscious manipulation of descriptions. It could be seen rather as the manipulation of the individual by worldly stimuli. To analyze this demands the internalization of Davidson's triangulation and the evaluation of the position of the literal, as a potentiality of the conventional, within the radical interpretive moment. Thus the triangulation partner of the speaker takes the form of the sum of McDowell's "second nature": the repertoire of what we know, accept and believe. This is the public element within our private meetings with the world. This repertoire is also the realm of understood truth conditions, the realm of the literal that takes the applications of truth-value.

To return to our opening points, this study is an attempt to assuage the fear that accepting that the world is larger than language stands in contradiction to current theories on language and knowledge, thus providing a common platform from which we no longer need to cling to the realist intuitions in our scientific worldview. It is a therapeutic hope in the service of increasing the realm of our understanding and

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<sup>21</sup> Black, Max, "How Metaphors Work: A Reply To Donald Davidson," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 186

deflating the field of disagreement that absorbs so much of our energy. An exploration of metaphor as the mechanism by which we conceive of the novel, based on the primacy of language as arbiter of reality will reduce, or eliminate the fear that this trend in philosophy causes us to lose the world, leaving us rootless in our knowledge. By attending to the fear of the unknown as a motivating force in life as well as philosophy, there opens the prospect that Rorty's hope is not as idealistic as it sounds. The unknown is not the world behind the veil but just the realm of that which we have not encountered, not applied our conceptual grip to. By emphasizing the theories of Davidson over the rhetoric of Rorty it will be seen that concepts such as community can be stretched far enough to encompass truth if seen in parallel with a general picture of doubt.

## 2 Truth, Communication and Meaning

Hope and pragmatism seem a mismatched pair. In common usage, pragmatic stands in opposition to hope, being a reference to hardnosed, realistic thinking. In its weaker manifestation, hope is opposed to terms such as planning, preparation, determination or analysis. Connotations of fuzziness or passivity can seldom be avoided; sentences such as “I hope it works out” or “I hope they agree” position one as either falsely modest (in that there truly was preparation one would downplay) or resigned to having no effect in the outcome of a situation.

In a certain sense, Rorty is just such a purveyor of fuzzy hopes. As arguably today’s leading pragmatist, he can be seen to have taken up the banner of Emerson and Whitman as much as Dewey, James or Peirce. His faith in the human spirit appears to affect his philosophy. On the issue of truth, this is hope without a program. It feels good, may even be valid, but offers no nourishment; it gives us no way of getting from point A to point B. His social hopes for the concept of truth often take a form such as this:

I should like to replace both religious and philosophical accounts of a suprahistorical ground or an end-of-history convergence with a historical narrative about the rise of liberal institutions and customs... Such a narrative would clarify the conditions in which the idea of truth as correspondence to reality might gradually be replaced by the idea of truth as what comes to be believed in the course of free and open encounters.<sup>22</sup>

This can be taken as a restatement of Rorty’s emphasis on justification, instead of truth, as the only possible discursive standard. This standard will be recognized through convincing explanations, not theory building.

Instead of theory, Rorty chooses to call this type of rhetoric Wittgensteinian therapy. In a reply to Davidson’s article, “Truth Rehabilitated”, he questions Davidson’s attachment to a theory of meaning after having already shown that there is no separation between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world:

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<sup>22</sup> Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 68

Wittgensteinians are not sure why, now that Davidson has erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally, he still thinks we need a theory of meaning. Why should we suppose that there is a theory which captures this sort of know-how? If we need no theory, maybe we can just set aside Tarski and truth-conditions? Just as Wittgenstein got over his youthful, Tractarian, desire for structure, so maybe we can get over, if not Tarski on formalized languages, at least the desire to carry Tarski over into non-formalized languages.<sup>23</sup>

Rorty recommends instead “diagnoses” of philosophical complaints without a constructive element. In this case, in order to “say that philosophers have finished with the concept of truth when they have stopped using ‘truth’ in the ways Davidson thinks they should stop using it”: as a goal of inquiry, unattainable, a matter of faith, etc.<sup>24</sup>

That Rorty is troubled could be due to a common misconception about Davidson’s work. He criticizes in the same response Davidson’s adherence to a recursive theory in explanation of how communication is accomplished, questioning the assumption that one needs a theory of truth before understanding another speaker. But this is not only not one that Davidson subscribes to, but one which he firmly denies. The knowledge of a theory of truth or meaning swings free of our use of a language. It is the concept of objective truth that does not. As a condition of communicative comprehension, Davidson maintains it is grasped by all who can be credited with thought. In this way, it is as necessary for an act of justification as it is for any other understanding.

In other words, Davidson holds, “many of the uses of ‘true’ that Rorty mentions would be hard to understand if we did not grasp what [Davidson] take[s] to be the basic use.”<sup>25</sup> The Tarskian truth-conditions that Davidson employs are descriptive elements which allow us to grasp linguistic meaning, not normative

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<sup>23</sup> Rorty, Richard, “Response to Donald Davidson,” in *Rorty And His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000) 74

<sup>24</sup> *ibid* p 76

<sup>25</sup> Davidson, Donald, “Appendix,” in *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) 322



imperatives. Rorty shouldn't fear that they smuggle in any of the uses of truth he would have us stop using since they serve to describe habits of behavior, not dictate to that behaviour.

Rorty's disagreement with Davidson over a theory of truth can be seen to concern certain conclusions he draws from the realization that "we never understand anything except under a description." From the inability to get behind our language to a thing's nature as it is for itself ("cutting nature at the joints") he makes the leap that truth is dispensable or trivial. He sees his denial that one form of description could take a hierarchic precedence over others as requiring that, for example, "our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest."<sup>26</sup> But this leap, as I have characterized it here, is problematic on two points. One is that the ramifications of Rorty's suggested substitutions for truth do not rise above the problems he locates in the use of the concept. The other is that Davidson should be seen as providing a description in a manner that Rorty finds appealing while showing truth to be anything but trivial.

We could shift from talking about epistemology to talking about politics, as Rorty would like us to. But this doesn't help reconcile various attitudes about truth. His therapeutic diagnosis provides negative grounds for the shift: the failure of coherently presenting a correspondence theory of truth leading to the untenable concept of truth (and so language) as representation. The positive counterparts on the other hand, expectedly, say nothing constructive about truth at all. He recommends that we should instead attend to justification to a (ever widening, contemporary) group of language users or, as above, truth should be seen as that which results from non-oppressive communication thus reducing it to agreement or caution within justification.

But even a temporally conditioned concept of justification fails in removing its gradient aspect. Something can be non-justified, partially justified or well justified. This logically opens for the idea that something could be perfectly justified, justified universally. It appears that the universal counterpart to a scalar concept cannot be legislated away. Our thoughts will always slip towards the possibility even if we believe it to be unattainable.

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<sup>26</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 8

An appeal to open and free encounters is not much better. Aside from that it would be strange for a conversation partner to admit to subverting a discussion by dishonest means, this condition opens for just the aspect to truth Akeel Bilgrami says is inescapable: truth as a value. If we wish to retain positive values for the terms ‘open’ and ‘free’, then there must be grounds for refuting a charge of manipulation of an encounter greater than “I value open and free encounters.” The further query could be “Why do you value such encounters over encounters that get you what you want?” “Because I value truth as a goal.”<sup>27</sup> The normativity of ‘open’ and ‘free’ does not release us from the normativity of truth in inquiry and belief that Bilgrami identifies and that Rorty rejects.

In our turning to Davidson’s theory, Rorty himself informs us of why we cannot just give up on ideas such as truth conditions, why we need a *theory* of truth. He says in “Truth without Correspondence to Reality,” that “inquiry and justification are activities we language-users cannot help engaging in ... language-users can no more help justifying their beliefs and desires to one another than stomachs can help grinding up foodstuffs.”<sup>28</sup> Merely saying we can do without truth doesn’t make it so. We desire and demand explanations in order to agree, and theories are a most powerful form of explanation.

In some form these explanations will be constructive. Even a program of therapy in Rorty’s manner can only point towards discarding some concepts in light of favoring other fields of enquiry. His agreements with Thomas Kuhn should be sufficient to understand that he agrees it is not easy, if at all desirable, to give up on any given track of investigation. As Davidson shows, theories may not be easily accessible, but they are powerful explanatory tools in a search for consistency.

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<sup>27</sup> One could easily imagine Rorty replying here that the proper response is something like, “Because I value democracy as a goal and open and free encounters are a condition of democracy.” Fair enough, but then truth would not be the result of such encounters as Rorty claims. It also doesn’t respond to Bilgrami’s observation that the liar must value truth as a norm, otherwise what norm is he violating with a lie? Truth understood in this way is actually the attempt to hold on to an objective test to whether or not one adheres to the type of normative commands that lie behind Rorty’s attempted substitutions. These commands, such as “Be honest,” or “Value democracy,” can not be seen as having the same force as “Speak the truth” as long as one perceives truth as being an independent standard.

<sup>28</sup> Rorty, Richard, “Truth without Correspondence to Reality,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) 38

Though Davidson's use of truth may stimulate Rorty's angst in regards to foundationalism, the irony is that the conclusions in Davidson's work he agrees with could not have been formulated without the development of radical interpretation as a theory of meaning.<sup>29</sup>

So in order to appreciate how Davidson delivers a theory of meaning by reliance on a conditioned Tarski truth theory method we should turn to his development of radical interpretation. Afterwards, it will be possible to see how he can be used to satisfy Rorty's goals and allay his fears while providing a strong description of just what it is for understanding, and so communication, to take place.

## 2.1 Towards radical interpretation

Davidson offers us a description of what it is to understand a language, or perhaps more specifically, what it is to understand a speaker. He opens the first volume of his collected essays, *Inquiries Into Truth And Interpretation*, thus:

What is it for words to mean what they do? ... I explore the idea that we would have an answer to this question if we knew how to construct a theory satisfying two demands: it would provide an interpretation of all utterances, actual and potential, of a group of speakers; and it would be verifiable without knowledge of the detailed propositional attitudes of the speaker.<sup>30</sup>

This statement, in broad outline, contains the roots of the explanatory power of Davidson's semantic approach. As he continues, a theory of interpretation has as its application the holism inherent in communication. In addition, the avoidance of

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<sup>29</sup> It can also be the case that Rorty's anxiety stems from the connection between "getting things right" and an adherence to "correspondence with reality". Bjørn Ramberg has persuaded Rorty (*Rorty And His Critics*, 2000) to accept Davidson's claim that the majority of our beliefs get the objects of those beliefs right, but I believe it is unclear just how far reaching this conversion is. It remains to be seen if it would cause a reevaluation of Rorty's commitments and doubts as detailed here.

<sup>30</sup> Davidson, Donald, "Introduction," in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) xv

intensional notions frees of us the danger of circularly explaining meaning by meaning itself, or something too closely aligned to it.

These conditions are clear enough. As language users, we accept that words have meanings and that we can arrange them in an infinite number of (syntactically bound) ways to convey and understand more complex meanings. Also, no one is satisfied with circular definitions; we accept that a definition must enlighten through reference to elements not being defined. The method by which we are meet these conditions is much less clear, but the third necessary condition provides a stronger elaboration of what it should look like.

This condition is the principle of charity. Though it tends to lead to confusion, this condition positions the application of a theory of meaning in the proper environment and justifies the formal approach. With the principle of charity, a speaker is recognized *as* a speaker by an interpreter. If the interpreter is to understand the speaker, the speaker must be assumed to right about most things. This is to say that most of the speaker's beliefs must be true. This is not a norm or advice as to how to interact; the decision to (attempt to) communicate has already been assumed and so, as Davidson says, "disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement."<sup>31</sup> 'Charity' as used here should not be understood as intentional charitability, but as an ingredient providing for the possibility of communication. As Davidson's corollary makes clear:

[The principle of charity] should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.<sup>32</sup>

There is no reason to doubt this observation if understood for what it is, a framing condition on our linguistic behaviour. We do not enter into conversation with dogs, for example, nor even young children, due to that we cannot credit them with the

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<sup>31</sup>Davidson, Donald, "Radical Interpretation," in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) 137

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

standards of rationality and wealth of belief that would enable shared interpretation. Thus, the principle of charity reveals itself as a necessary and sufficient condition for appraising a creature as rational. It is not sufficient for communication as such, but still necessary.

From this principle we can begin to say much more about radical interpretation. The mass of belief assigned to the speaker must postulate objects of belief: at their most basic, the objects that make up our shared environment, the world.<sup>33</sup> Thus communication is identified as the relation between speaker, interpreter and the world, Davidson's triangulation. Any speaker must be in relation to the interpreter at some place with utterances being made at some time: in other words, an empirical relation. Remember that the goal is to describe what words and utterances *do* mean, a description with practical application that thus must have an empirical testing mechanism.

In order to test the theory we must have something to test, and possibilities arise from the details of the principle of charity. We have words and sentences, beliefs, and through the projection of a shared rationality, the tools of logical structure and truth and falsity. At this point, the term 'theory' becomes much more relevant due to the asymmetry of finite beings with finite vocabularies and infinite possibilities for beliefs and sentences. If language is to be learnable, as it incontestably is, then there must be a finite number of axioms which can recursively generate the infinite number of utterances as well as entail our understanding of them.

Let us take as an example, then, the hypothetical case of attempting to learn an unfamiliar language, L, from interaction with a speaker of that language. Given the conditions above, we need to identify what we have available as evidence for understanding for any arbitrary utterance *s* in L. Following Davidson and the principle of charity, we can "hold belief as constant as far as possible while solving for meaning."<sup>34</sup> We cannot distinguish which belief is being held, but we can assume that the utterance, in being true, expresses a true belief. The empirical evidence is

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<sup>33</sup> This is not to say that all language is about physical objects or that physical objects are the only things in the world. The assumption is that understanding of complex and abstract beliefs can be built upon simpler beliefs much in the way that sentences attain their meaning from the words in them (within a holistic restriction). Reference can also be made to early stages of language acquisition, be it first language or foreign.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

also available: what is taking place or present in our close vicinity at the time of the utterance. These elements can be connected with the logical sentential connective *if and only if*. The assumption being that if there is an interpretation for *s* in the interpreter's language, then that interpretation will be equivalent and unique to *s*.

The form for the theorems of an interpretive theory would then be:  
*s* is true in *L* if uttered by *a* at time *t* if and only if *x* at *t*, where *x* stipulates the empirical conditions prompting *s* at time *t*. An adequate theory of interpretation for *L* will entail sentences of this form for all possible utterances *s*. To use Davidson's example from "Radical Interpretation"<sup>35</sup>, it could be implemented thus:

On the one hand, we have T-sentences, in the form:

(T) 'Es regnet' is true-in-German when spoken by *x* at time *t* if and only if it is raining near *x* at time *t*.

On the other hand, we have the evidence, in the form:

(E) Kurt belongs to the German speech community and Kurt holds true 'Es regnet' on Saturday at noon and it is raining near Kurt on Saturday at noon.<sup>36</sup>

There are, of course, a couple of obvious things to say about the form of the T-sentences as theorems of a theory of meaning.

In this form of T-sentence, the right hand side of the bi-conditional doesn't translate or give the meaning of the left hand side. The theorem is a potentiality, it gives us the conditions by which the utterance would be true or false but not that the truth-value is determined by just these conditions. Truth conditions do not directly provide for meaning. There is also the possibility of mistake, on the part of speaker or interpreter or falsehoods on the part of the speaker. Both of these observations are connected in that a holistic constraint must be entailed by the activity of collecting evidence to learn the language. Davidson says, "the totality of T-sentences should ... optimally fit evidence about sentences held true by native speakers."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> While the presentation of radical interpretation, and Quine's radical translation, is "crystallized", as Bjørn Ramberg says, in the example of the field linguist and talk of 'isolated rabbit parts' (thus illustrating the issue of indeterminacy), the use of a familiar unknown language such as German is a more accessible example for our purposes. What we lose in colorfulness we gain in simplicity.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* 135

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* 139

It is only after a significant part of the language, ideally the totality, has been generated by the theory that any individual T-sentence can be said to deliver meaning. According to Davidson, it is “then we would see the place of the sentence in the language as a whole, we would know the role of each significant part of the sentence, and we would know about the logical connections between this sentence and others.”<sup>38</sup> This hypothetical task of interpretation would be a trial and error endeavor. It would rule out extraneous conditions, contingently related to certain utterances, by repeated attempts at ascertaining prompted assent to utterances under varying conditions. Ultimately, it is an involved linguistic feedback process that requires a large mass of evidence before false theorems can begin to drop out due to errors in consistency.<sup>39</sup>

The other observation about such a theory is that by requiring extensionality, truth has become the focus, with meaning and belief stemming from the holding true of an utterance coupled with a holistic constraint on evaluation. What has been described is a Davidsonian truth theory for a (unknown) natural language. This means that the totality of the T-sentences generated by the theory will give the extension of the predicate true-in-L. While this can be seen as a truth definition for L, the object language, it is based on a prior understanding of truth in the language of the interpreter, the metalanguage. This prior understanding, undefined, is the acceptance of truth as a primitive concept in Davidson’s radical translation. As he maintains, “truth is as clear and basic concept as we have ... Why on earth should we expect to be able to reduce truth to something clearer or more fundamental?”<sup>40</sup>

This sketch has outlined radical translation as applied to an alien language. Davidson’s project is domestic as well, when the language being studied is the

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

<sup>39</sup> As Davidson repeatedly acknowledges, this is also the basic progression to be found in W.V. Quine’s radical translation. While Davidson’s account is very similar, he makes no appeal, for example, to stimuli meanings as the evidence for demonstrative statements. He thus avoids a retreat into the intensional in the form of synonymy, while positing no intermediate step between the world and our understanding, giving the skeptic no room to maneuver, a point taken up in chapter 5. What Davidson calls his distal account appeals directly to the public elements that cause assent or dissent, stressing the holistic constraint, not an epistemological one. (See “Meaning, Truth, and Evidence” in Davidson’s *Truth, Language, and History*)

<sup>40</sup> Davidson, Donald, “Afterthoughts,” in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) 155-56

language of the theory itself. While translation may seem unnecessary when the object language is the metalanguage, the theory is not reduced to triviality. Nor does it exhibit an asymmetrical relation to the process of learning an alien language. In that the interpreter already knows the meaning of sentences on the left hand side of T-sentences, light can be shed on just how it is that meaning obtains, the role of the relation of triangulation, and the consequences of Davidson's use of truth theory construction to describe communication. In order to approach these aspects of radical translation it is helpful to say a little about the formal theory Davidson builds upon, the work of the Polish mathematician Alfred Tarski.

## 2.2 Tarski

To some degree, we have already seen how Davidson implements Tarski's semantic conception of truth: T-sentences as relativized theorems of a truth theory for an object language described in terms of a metalanguage. Tarski's project, though, was not one of interpretation. He was concerned with a definition of truth, as he says, to "construct-with reference to a given language-a materially adequate and formally correct definition of the term 'true sentence'."<sup>41</sup> In order to do so, he observed that "certain sentences of a special kind present themselves which could serve as partial definitions of the truth of a sentence."<sup>42</sup> These sentences are in the form of the familiar, *s* is true if and only if *p*. When *s* is replaced by the name of a sentence and *p* is replaced by that sentence itself it yields T-sentences that appear as: 'Snow is white' if and only if snow is white, when the object language is contained in the metalanguage. What is clear, as Tarski points out, is that for any language that has the universality of a natural language, this quickly devolves into the liar's paradox.

This is not the case with formal languages. Lacking the universality of natural languages, Tarski sees little danger that they would lead to the same complications. Thus, the framework of truth defined for an object language in the terms of more expansive metalanguage leads him to a stipulation of material adequacy, Convention

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<sup>41</sup> Tarski, Alfred, "The Concept of Truth In Formalized Languages" in *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics*, trans. J.H. Woodger (1956; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983) 152

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* 155



T. To paraphrase Tarski, this reads: A theory is adequate as a definition of truth that entails for all sentences  $s$  of language  $L$ , a theorem in the form of ‘ $s$  is true in  $L$  if and only if  $p$ ’ where  $s$  is replaced by a (structurally descriptive) name of any sentence in  $L$  and  $p$  is replaced by the translation of  $s$  in the metalanguage. This adequacy condition combined with the finite set of axioms giving the terms and relations of the formal language will generate the set of all true theorems for  $L$ . This set will exhaust the extension of the predicate true-in- $L$ , thus providing a truth definition for that language.

As Tarski says, if there were a finite number of sentences in  $L$  stipulated from the axioms, the schema above would be all that was needed. But a language that could not generate an infinite number of sentences could hardly be termed a language. So a recursive concept of satisfaction is introduced. An attempt to determine the truth or falsity of compound sentences by recourse to the simple sentences they are constructed from fails due to that this relationship does not, in general, hold. The theory instead requires “*satisfaction of a given sentential function by given objects.*”<sup>43</sup> This satisfaction is a relation between variables in the sentences of  $L$  and objects of the ontology of the metalanguage. Satisfaction for sentences with a single variable can be described thus:

Within colloquial language we can in this way obtain, for example, the following formulation:

*For all  $a$ ,  $a$  satisfies the sentential function ‘ $x$  is white’ if and only if  $a$  is white* (and from this conclude, in particular, that snow satisfies the function ‘ $x$  is white’)<sup>44</sup>

The concept is amended to accommodate multiple variables first by reference to ordered pairs, eventually stated generally as: “*a given infinite sequence of objects satisfies a given sentential function.*”<sup>45</sup>

It is possible, then, to generate from the terms and conditions of the truth theory all true sentences of  $L$ , and with the addition of a concept of satisfaction, know

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* 189 (Tarski distinguishes sentences from sentential functions by the appearance or not of variables. Sentences, as containing no variables, are shown to be satisfied by either every infinite sequence or none, either True or False. See p 194 of the cited work)

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* 190

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* 191

that they are true, thus delivering the extension of true-in-L. This is not, of course, a general definition of truth; truth is not defined for the metalanguage or any other language other than that specified by the designator L. The object language/metalanguage scheme, and the success of the project, is dependent upon two semantic concepts: a intuitive understanding of truth (which he also terms primitive) and the undefined concept of translation (apparent in ‘means that’ or ‘gives the meaning of’).<sup>46</sup>

These two concepts are the starting point of Davidson’s use of Tarski and truth theories. Tarski, commenting in general on the semantic concepts, can be seen to have encouraged the type of endeavor Davidson has set forth for meaning, despite his stated pessimism concerning natural languages. What he says is this:

It has always been possible to replace every phrase which concerns these semantical terms, and which concern particular structurally described expressions of the language, by a phrase which is equivalent in content and is free of such terms. In other words it is possible to formulate infinitely many partial definitions for every semantical concept, which in their totality exhaust all cases of the application of the concept to concrete expressions and of which the sentences adduced ...[by]... convention T are examples.<sup>47</sup>

This still does not extend Tarski’s application past that of formal languages. But it is very similar to the strategy by which Davidson identifies the totality of T-sentences as a holistic constraint in order to arrive at meaning, and his treatment of belief in the same process.

### 2.3 A theory of truth as a theory of meaning

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<sup>46</sup> The correspondence of satisfaction also remains undefined but it is not clear that we have to take Tarski’s word for that this necessitates a realist perspective, what he terms the “classical conception of truth (true-corresponding with reality)”. It can be seen to be as unproblematic as Davidson’s causality if, like Davidson, one wishes to pursue meaning with a holistic constraint.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* 253

We have seen that Tarsk's claim that a truth definition as he describes is not possible for a natural language due to antinomies such as the liar's paradox. This would be fatal for Davidson's project if it was reliant on a truth definition in a Tarskian sense. But Davidson is involved with elucidating another semantic concept, that of meaning. Davidson himself is seen to ignore the paradox as unimportant, or that it casts an unreasonable doubt on claims of the universality of natural languages. A clearer response is possible, though.

If we recall, the modified T-sentences do not determine the truth-value, they merely describe what would have to be the case for the sentence to be true. The liar paradox presents no problem for a theory of meaning since the theory rests on truth conditions not truth-values. It was the conflict of irreconcilable truth-value that causes the failure of consistency in a truth definition. We clearly recognize the paradox as a paradox: we know that for it to be false requires that it be true and *visa versa*. That there may be indefinite truth-values, an inherent instability, can be taken as a given of natural languages without this quality threatening our ability to understand sentences. For example, the claim, "A city will never be built on this spot" can be understood on the basis of what would have to be the case for it to be true without my actual, physical observation of this spot having to extend into eternity. The truth-value of such a unverifiable claim in no way affects my comprehension of its meaning.

So by relinquishing the demand for a truth definition in natural language, the possibility of establishing a truth theory poses no problem of consistency. By adherence to Convention T, the sentences of a natural language (say English) can be generated in Tarski's form: 'snow is white' if and only if snow is white. The structure alone is enough to determine the truth of such sentences in Tarski's scheme, but this is dependent upon the undefined concept of translation. Without translation, if the truth-value of sentences determined meaning, then the pursuit of meaning through truth theory construction would quickly lead to the inconsistencies of logical equivalence.

This is shown by an instance of, for example, 'snow is white' is true if and only if grass is green. What exhibits, as Davidson terms, "the grotesqueness" of this sentence is only our intensional intuitions regarding meaning. Logically, the truth-value is preserved by replacing '*p*' with any true sentence, but semantics demand something greater. The idea that something is made true by a fact or an isolated entity

in the world independent of humans and their beliefs is often appealed to. But reference, or correspondence, in this manner shows itself to arrive at the same unacceptable inconsistency.

In “True to the Facts,” Davidson employs the possible formulation: “The statement that  $p$  corresponds to the fact that  $q$ .” This is not problematic if we replace ‘ $p$ ’ and ‘ $q$ ’ by the same sentence, it would merely be a manner (confusing perhaps) in which to restate ‘if and only if’. Following Davidson’s rendition:

When does [the sentence above] hold? Certainly when ‘ $p$ ’ and ‘ $q$ ’ are replaced by the same sentence; after that the difficulties set in. The statement that Naples is farther north than Red Bluff corresponds to the fact that Naples is farther north than Red Bluff, but also, it would seem, to the fact that Red Bluff is farther south than Naples (perhaps the same fact). Also to the fact that Red Bluff is farther south than the largest Italian city within thirty miles of Ischia. When we reflect that Naples is the city that satisfies the following description: it is the largest city within thirty miles of Ischia, and such that London is in England, then we begin to suspect that if a statement corresponds to one fact, it corresponds to all.<sup>48</sup>

This is a version of the slingshot argument arrived at by various philosophers (C.I. Lewis, Frege, Gödel, Church), all ending up at the One Fact. Like ‘snow is white’ if and only if grass is green, the One Fact is unacceptable due to the intensional context of belief and meaning, despite commitments to logical truth.

It could be objected that Tarski’s satisfaction is just such a correspondence scheme (as Davidson once held). Leaving aside that Tarski also wound up with a version of the slingshot argument, it is easy to be misled by the above quote “that snow satisfies the function ‘ $x$  is white’”. It could be imagined that with enough determination all statements of fact could be rewritten with variable for their composite parts and so satisfied, yielding a representational reference. But since this still holds no relation to truth without intensionality, the complexity of predicates defeats the premise. As Davison notes in “Reality Without Reference”:

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<sup>48</sup> Davidson, “True to the Facts”, *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, 41-42

When the theory comes to characterize satisfaction for the predicate ' $x$  flies', for example, it merely tells us that an entity satisfies ' $x$  flies' if and only if that entity flies. If we ask for a further explanation or analysis of the relation, we will be disappointed.<sup>49</sup>

So without structure directly informing us of anything other than the trivially true, satisfaction not providing an extensional content, and the expressed goal of escaping the intensional context, of what use is 'snow is white' if and only if snow is white?

The answer to this lies in the relationship between the domestic generation of T-sentences and the process of radical interpretation as described previously. As noted, radical interpretation is both domestic and foreign. In the domestic application, it is even clearer that an elucidation of communication must employ all our resources simultaneously in a holistic fashion. Davidson remarks that: "...interpreting an agent's intentions, his beliefs and his words are parts of a single project, no part of which can be assumed to be complete before the rest is."<sup>50</sup>

As we have seen, Davidson holds that no reduction of truth is possible. He strengthens Tarski's intuitive view of truth in a metalanguage by making truth conditions part of an explanatory process. In reference to Tarski's method, Davidson claims, "What I propose is to reverse the direction of explanation: assuming translation, Tarski was able to define truth; the present idea is to take truth as basic and extract an account of translation or interpretation."<sup>51</sup> Thus, we should appreciate 'snow is white' if and only if snow is white not just as a triviality. Since trivially understood by all of whom it can be said understand English, it is an expression of the pre-analytical understanding of truth: truth as a primitive, non-reducible concept.

Davidson states Convention T without a translation condition as this:

An acceptable theory of truth must entail, for every sentence  $s$  of the object language, a sentence of the form:  $s$  is true if and only if  $p$ , where ' $p$ ' is replaced by any sentence that is true if and only if  $s$  is. Given this formulation,

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<sup>49</sup> Davidson, "Reality Without Reference," *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, 217

<sup>50</sup> Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, 127

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* 134

the theory is tested by evidence that T-sentences are simply true; we have given up the idea that we must also tell whether what replaces '*p*' translates *s*.<sup>52</sup>

Stating Convention T in this manner provides the theoretical condition for the replacement in this manner of '*s*' and '*p*' in the discussion of the problem of logical equivalence. The truth conditions for such T-sentences are simplistic and immediate, but not so the empirical evaluation of them. There remains the issue of relating the trivially true T-sentences to T-sentences relativized to the conditions of utterance at time *t*.

Without the indexical elements exhibited in our foreign example, the empirical relativization of sentences such as 'snow is white' if and only if snow is white is not readily apparent. For the attribution of the meanings of the words that compose this sentence to avoid the correspondence trap we must modify Convention T further. Davidson states that, "The present idea is that what Tarski assumed outright for each T-sentence can be indirectly elicited by a holistic constraint"<sup>53</sup> By discarding the translation requirement in Tarski's Convention T in favor of the holistic constraint of radical interpretation, the meanings of words are seen to derive their potency from their repeated positions in sentences.

Sentences without indexical factors<sup>54</sup> (as all others), will then be evaluated within the total framework of the language; this will, of course, include indexical statements. In other words, the fact that 'snow is white' will be comprehended by the totality of facts about snow, including such directly indexical statements such as 'that is snow'. Davidson refers to Frege in his description of a holistic view of meaning:

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.* 134

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* 139

<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, it is not clear how any utterance could be without indexical elements. To express 'snow is white' demands someone who expresses it at some time, verbally or written, for some intentional purpose. There are no free floating sentences with a life of their own. Though a T-sentence description of these sentences may be complicated, perhaps taking the form of a proof (as Davidson mentions). Even though this is talk about talking, I don't believe it would necessitate introduction of a concept of a meta-theory or employ greater resources than already present in radical interpretation.

If sentences depend for their meaning on their structure, and we understand the meaning of each item in the structure only as an abstraction from the totality of sentences in which it features, then we can give the meaning of every sentence (and word) only by giving the meaning of every sentence (and word) in the language. Frege said that only in the context of a sentence does a word have meaning; in the same vein he might have added that only in the context of the language does a sentence (and therefore a word) have meaning.<sup>55</sup>

This holistic view of meaning is the eventual escape from the intensional context in the pursuit of meaning. Words take their meanings from their locations in sentences and sentences take their meanings from their location in a network of language and this network is public and manifest.

To sum up, radical interpretation suffices to answer the question Davidson started out with: How do words mean what they do? The development of a theory of truth along the lines of Tarski and based on a recursive syntax and finite vocabulary, will generate all of the true sentences of a language. The modification of Tarski's Convention T by the elimination of the translation condition and the addition of a holistic constraint will begin to provide for the meanings of words and sentences, or rather, utterances. This requires the extra step of relativizing utterances to a speaker and time. The form of T-sentences treated this way will vary from the direct "s is true if and only if p", but will retain the same quality, that of providing the truth conditions for every utterance in the language. In this way, radical interpretation takes the form of an empirical theory of meaning arising from a theory of truth.

In order to truly say that this is a theory of meaning for a natural language requires the treatment of many auxiliary issues, only a couple of which have been addressed here. Indeterminacy of interpretation (which Davidson likens to the existence of varying systems for temperature), logical form for different forms and components of sentence structure such as tense, determinants or adjectives and adverbs, or how Davidson deals with belief sentences, for example. The main thrust of the theory has been explained, though, allowing for understanding of Davidson's

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<sup>55</sup> Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, 22

pivotal claim: “What gives my belief its content and my sentence its meaning, is my knowledge of what is required for the belief or sentence to be true.”<sup>56</sup>

## 2.4 Triangulation and Community

This brings us back to the discussion of Rorty’s goals and social hope. Though Rorty has been distressed by Davidson’s recourse to semantic theory, and perhaps even more by a claim for truth not named directly in our detailing of radical interpretation. Davidson maintains that truth is not only primitive, but objective, in the sense of intersubjective, publicly available and verifiable. This still does not imply that truth justifies claims or exists independently of communicative interpretation. It merely says that the world exerts the sharable causal influences on us that lead us to the holding of utterances as true. The world is the third corner of Davidson’s triangulation, independent of our intensional attitudes. And it is the consequences of triangulation that align Davidson with Rorty.

As Davidson observes: “Nothing in the world would count as a sentence, and the concept of truth would therefore have no application, if there were not creatures that used sentences by uttering or inscribing tokens of them.”<sup>57</sup> This is not to agree with Rorty’s Wittgensteinian stance that use defines meaning, or to think that truth can be replaced by changing our uses of it. Davidson is clear “that holding a sentence true, or taking it to express a belief, is not a *use* of language.”<sup>58</sup> They are necessary conditions for using language, determinable only by their holistic interaction. But that does not make our elucidation of these attitudes impossible, due to the methods of radical interpretation. By insisting that truth is an attribute of utterances, Davidson demands that we do not lose sight of speakers and interpreters as abstracts of real individuals.

For language to appear requires that individuals come (or have come) to a point of accord on what holds true. They must share an environment and begin having some form of linguistic encounters concerning that environment. That there has ever been a truly ‘free and open encounter’ may be a matter for some dispute, but

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<sup>56</sup> Davidson, “Epistemology and Truth,” *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 189

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* 181

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* 190



that we come to believe things in the course of our linguistic encounters is indisputable. It is one of the aspects that make natural languages universal. Davidson, like Rorty, rejects that we ‘cut nature at the joints’, but for Davidson this is not a rejection of truth in favor of description, but a dependence upon truth in order to emphasize the role of community in forming those descriptions (propositions).

Community, then, is a condition for communication, not a goal of it. As a goal, we can ask for better communication, perhaps more honest communication. This may just be the lesson of radical interpretation. Rorty’s goals of an every widening liberal society or the relinquishing of divisive concepts like ‘truth as correspondence to reality’ can be served by an understanding of how we are reliant on each other for our very understanding of the world. If I cannot hold the truth in my pocket, as Davidson would agree, then I also cannot use it as an argumentative weapon. If I am bound to others by our shared beliefs, the issues of evidence and justification must reflect our interdependence, not attempt to appeal to a non-human standard. As Davison says, “all that counts as evidence or justification for a belief must come from the same totality of belief to which it belongs.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 153

### 3 Dynamism and Literal Meaning

The relativization of t-sentences to a speaker and a time begins to show how triangulation plays a fundamental role in radical interpretation. Talk of truth theories and formal constraints relaxes its grip on our general picture and contextual communication is established as central in Davidson's semantics. This is clearest in his later essay "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," arguably his most complex presentation of radical interpretation. The next two chapters will be discussing perspectives this essay offers and the challenges they pose for how we conceive of language, with metaphor being introduced in this chapter and returned to in chapter 5.

The event specific dynamism described in that essay focuses on the interpretative necessity in communication when it becomes most apparent, when problems arise. Malapropisms, mistakes and metaphors are the central examples of why seeing language as governed by rules or conventions is mistaken. Davidson argues that communication succeeds in spite of deviation or misuse due to the expectations of language users and the clues to interpretation they provide to each other: communicative strategies. This is the structure and creation of meaning; content being dependent on the context of any given triangulation event. This dependency follows one through all levels of interaction with our environment by requiring a frame of reference, a system of coordinates, into which we position elements of awareness in order for meaning to obtain.<sup>60</sup>

Attempts to detail the structure of meaning have been confused by the belief that the different categories we place meanings into stand in separate relations to context; that there is a frame of reference, such as 'standard' or 'literal', that is independent of any individual actor. This could be seen as a myth of meaning without interpreter. This understanding, this myth, has led mainly to attempts to reduce or define categories of meaning such as use or metaphor to literal meaning. In assuming that the literal has, in some manner, a firmer connection to meaning and content due to context independency, philosophers have tried to show that metaphor also has such qualities. They want to say that metaphoric meaning also demands respect, is more

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<sup>60</sup> The use of terms such as 'place' or 'position' should not be misconstrued as implying conscious, willful acts. The positioning or locating of elements within a coordinate system, or the totality of our beliefs *is* understanding, not a prior activity.

than ‘just’ use. In general, there is a tendency to see literal meaning as a yardstick by which other aspects of language must be measured.

The attempt to anchor the category of literal is misguided and the assumption it is based on widespread. Priority assignment in meaning is too contingent to shed much light on the structure of meaning. Literal meaning doesn’t, for example, lie quivering in books regardless of whether we open them or not. A book requires an individual to imbue it with meaning; there must be an interpreting individual appreciating a contextual relation for any meaning to obtain.

If just showing that literal meaning was context dependent was our point, we could look to John Searle’s argument in *Expression And Meaning*. Searle gives a good reason for why we cannot merely dictate that the meaning of some sentences (such as observation sentences or the definitions found in dictionaries) be context independent. In response to the rhetorical suggestion that such a convention be established he states:

literal meaning is dependent on context in the same way that other non-conventional forms of intentionality are dependent on context, and there is no way to eliminate the dependence in the case of literal meaning which would not break the connections with other forms of intentionality...<sup>61</sup>

This is to say that, like perception, literal meaning is understood against a set of background assumptions. He holds that there is no separation between the meaning of a sentence, “The cat is on the mat” and the perception or belief that there is a cat on the mat.

The issue of intentionality coincides well with Davidson’s triangulation, indeed, Davidson has repeatedly argued along those lines. But merely identifying this quality of literal meaning does not go far enough for our current purpose. Context dependency, though an element of all understanding, does not fully explain how we know what we mean. Since Davidson has both argued for a context free literal meaning in “What Metaphors Mean” and against this same position in articles like “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” it would be better to delve deeper into the relation

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<sup>61</sup> Searle, John, *Expression And Meaning, Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 135

between metaphor and literal meaning in hopes of finding an explanation that can shed light on meaning as a general category rife with levels of interpretative activity.

A serious evaluation of what Davidson's schema of prior and passing theories (from "Derangement") offers is a theoretical realignment of the interaction of our meaning categories. What this shows is that the diametric opposition of metaphor to literal meaning is misplaced. Literal meaning is specified meaning, thus stabilized. Metaphor, as is readily accepted, is an unstable possibility of meaning. It resists stabilization up to a point, dependent on a process of domestication. Once domesticated, robbed of its metaphoric force or dead, it becomes conventional. It was literal numerous times in this process, more accessible each time. Eventually a definition of literal meaning extracted from "Derangement" will show how this repositioning of these linguistic concepts is formulated and begin to show why it is beneficial.

### 3.1 Davidson's Dreamwork

Literal meaning has been by no means a rock solid concept. Attempting to define it will wind up at the point so clearly and poignantly presented in any dictionary. The OED, for example, informs us that literal means "without metaphor, exaggeration, or inaccuracy", or "free from figures of speech, exaggeration, distortion, or allusion." In other words, if attempting to posit the literal against the metaphoric in any explanatory sense, we arrive at a viciously circular definition. This suggests that an analysis must go beyond these classifications of meaning to a more general look at language use. Davidson has in separate writings given us both the problematic opposition of literal to metaphoric as well as an application of radical interpretation which, I will argue, allows a dissolution of a degree of the mystification surrounding the issue of metaphor.

The cornerstone of Davidson's article, "What Metaphors Mean" is the conventional understanding of literal meaning.<sup>62</sup> He states, "Literal meaning and

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<sup>62</sup> What I attribute to Davidson as claims for literal meaning outside of direct quotations are arrived at through the negative claims he states for metaphoric meaning understood with the implication that the positive counterpart applies to literal meaning.

literal truth conditions can be assigned to words and sentences apart from particular contexts of use.”<sup>63</sup> Davidson will retain for literal meaning a context independent position, transcending use. Literal statements (or the meanings they represent) convey truths or falsities and contain cognitive content. There is a closed catalogue of interpretation for literal statements, and these are “ordinary” meanings governed by linguistic customs (or conventions).

These qualities are contrasted to the phenomenon of metaphor, which he claims, “belongs exclusively to the domain of use” and is “like a picture or a bump on the head, [it can] make us appreciate some fact – but not by standing for, or expressing the fact.”<sup>64</sup> Noting that in an attempt to paraphrase or tease out just what it is a metaphor is referring to, the fact that “we can’t provide an exhaustive catalogue”<sup>65</sup> is offered to reinforce this view. The assumption is that we can independently determine what literal meanings are. Unlike metaphor, there is a limit to the literal beyond which it can be said a mistake has been made, that the falsity is unacceptable.

Both proponents and opponents of metaphorical meaning or the cognitive content of metaphor take as given that literal meaning has such standard meaning or such independent content. Max Black’s interaction view of metaphor employs almost the exact understanding of literal meaning as to be found in “What Metaphors Mean.” It is only what metaphor accomplishes that they disagree on. For example, in the essay “Metaphor,” while postulating systems of commonplaces that are literal or standard qualities of words, Black states, “Literal uses of [a word] are governed by syntactical and semantical rules, violation of which produces nonsense or self-contradiction.”<sup>66</sup> These literal systems provide for Black the raw material that can interact to generate meaning in a metaphorical sense. The interaction thus accomplishes an alteration in the systems of commonplaces it engages.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean”, *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*, 247

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.* 262

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.* 263

<sup>66</sup> Black, Max, “Metaphor” in *Models and Metaphors: Studies In Language And Philosophy* (1962; reprint, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966) 40

<sup>67</sup> It should be mentioned that in a later writing [“More About Metaphor” in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony (1979; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 22] Black states it is ‘disastrous’ to see metaphor as deviation since this leads to reductive tendencies, perhaps hinting that this is Davison’s mistake. But without this latter statement, it is difficult to read the quoted passage from “Metaphor” as avoiding just this assumption, as least for some possible examples of metaphor.

For Davidson, this literality *is* just the meaning of the metaphor. The transposition carries no semantic weight of its own. This is the root of their dispute over paraphrasability of metaphor. Both deny that it is desirable or even possible to paraphrase a metaphor. For Black, such an attempt “will not have the same power to inform and enlighten as the original.”<sup>68</sup> This is due to the metaphoric interaction having its own unique cognitive content. Davidson, by maintaining that metaphor is a causal relation, denies there is any non-apparent content to be enlightened by. Paraphrase is unnecessary since “a metaphor *says* only what shows on its face—usually a patent falsehood or an absurd truth.”<sup>69</sup>

It is easy to read this as assigning a privileged position to truth-values. Much weight is attached to the idea of truth-value in Davidson’s conception of meaning in “What Metaphors Mean,” perhaps even more so by his critics. Black criticizes in his reply to the essay that Davidson wishes “to deny ... that in [metaphorical] utterances any *truth-claims* are made.”<sup>70</sup> For Davidson to observe, though, that metaphors are usually patently false or trivially true is not stating that only truth claims have meaning. It is just that he holds that there is no special, non-literal meaning within metaphor to be grasped. And as he also notes, the falsity of the metaphorical statement is often the first clue to that we are dealing with a metaphor. He holds that it is the truth conditions of the literal components of a metaphor which first allow identification, and so understanding, of it as other than literal.

The problem is that a further explanation of what ‘other than literal’ could be is lacking, easily lending support to Black’s reading of Davidson’s view. Claims for the literal provide only a shadow refutation of metaphoric meaning, not necessarily a strong rebuttal of metaphor’s possibly exceptional status. This framing of the relationship between metaphor and literal meaning falls short of the attempt of convincingly denying that metaphors carry a separate meaning from what he terms the literal one. But this is not because metaphors have such meaning, *per se*. It is because his claims for literal meaning do not succeed.

This is not an acceptance Black’s points about metaphor. Rather, it should be seen as though both are correct about certain elements of literal meaning and metaphor and incorrect about others. What we shall see is that while metaphor is

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid.* 46

<sup>69</sup> Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” 259

<sup>70</sup> Black, “How Metaphors Work: A Reply to Donald Davidson”, *On Metaphor*, 186

thoroughly semantic, as a representative of a linguistic relation, there is not metaphoric meaning in the way Black speaks of it. There is only literal meaning. But not in the way Davidson would have in “What Metaphors Mean.” Literal meaning is not the same thing as conventional meaning. From an understanding of the dynamism of the communicative event comes the explanation as to why a theory of metaphor or a theory of literal meaning will, on its own, fail to describe either phenomenon. Not because of any quality internal to metaphoric or literal statements but because they are both categorizations springing from a common cause: meaning itself and the mechanisms by which we make sense of it.

This requires that we stop analyzing different classifications of meaning in terms of each other. The attempts to hold one classification as basic and others derivative lead only to further mystification. Instead, it is better to begin to speak of degrees of novelty or difficulty involved in any specific communicative act. Instead of a dichotomy of entities termed metaphoric and literal, we are faced with a scale with opposing poles being something like radically interpretive and semantically available; terms that will be shown to refer to the stability of meaning within communication.

The manner in which meaning is understood within radical interpretation casts doubts on that any aspect of language *has* cognitive content, the *ability to express* a fact. To hold that a statement *has* or *expresses* something is a projection of the function of our understanding onto the statement itself: a personification, or enchantment, of our linguistic tools. In order to make sense of this we must turn to Davidson’s explanation of communicative encounters from “Derangement.”

### 3.2 Prior and Passing

There can be no meaning, metaphoric, literal or otherwise, without context. There must be an interpreting individual using or creating a truth-theory within a triangular relation: herself, a speaker and the world. Ultimately this context is one of

language use: utterances<sup>71</sup> and their interpretations. The manner in which Davidson explains the communicative moment in “Derangement” is through what he calls prior and passing theories. It is important to stress, and not lose sight of, that what Davidson terms theories here are multitude, dynamic, individual, and under constant revision. These theories are the generators of content in the Davidsonian form of: “what gives my belief its content and my sentence its meaning is my knowledge of what is required for the belief or the sentence to be true.”<sup>72</sup>

Prior and passing theories are event specified uses of Davidson’s broader theoretical project of radical interpretation. The comprehension of truth conditions, modeled on his adaptation of Tarski’s truth definition yielding belief and meaning, is related to a speaker and interpreter within a language community. The object and metalanguage elements in radical interpretation fall away to reveal strategies by which we can understand (interpret) not just deviations in expected speech, but the manner by which we are able to recognize a deviation. By introducing prior and passing theories as event oriented truth theories, Davidson fleshes out his work on interpretation through application to our everyday linguistic activities.

We approach each communicative event with a set of assumptions and expectations for what a speaker will mean by what she says: a prior theory. This is developed by “the evidence so far available to him: knowledge of the character, dress, role, sex of the speaker, and whatever else has been gained by observing the speaker’s behaviour, linguistic or otherwise.”<sup>73</sup> As the event takes place, the speaker will enable an understanding based on their own prior theory oriented towards the interpreter, with revision occurring on the basis of clues passing in both directions. The absorption and harmonizing of the revisions are the synchronization of each party’s passing theory, the location of successful communication. As Davidson describes it:

The interpreter comes to the occasion of utterance armed with a theory that tells him (or so he believes) what an arbitrary utterance of the speaker means.

The speaker then says something with the intention that it will be interpreted

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<sup>71</sup> Discounted for the purposes of this writing, not denied, is the broader view of language as the total mass of communicative gesture or symbol, of which utterance is just a part.

<sup>72</sup> Davidson, “Epistemology and Truth”, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 189

<sup>73</sup> Davidson, Donald, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” in *Truth And Interpretation*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989) 441



in a certain way, and the expectation that it will be so interpreted. In fact, this way is not provided for by the interpreter's theory. But the speaker is nevertheless understood; the interpreter adjusts his theory so that it yields the speaker's intended interpretation. [Intentionally or not] what is common to the cases is that the speaker expects to be, and is, interpreted as the speaker intended although the interpreter did not have a correct theory in advance.<sup>74</sup>

Though this detailing of such an event is generalized, we are all familiar with the phenomenon.

If I were to say, "It's a nice day!" someone I was speaking to would be expected (given it was indeed a nice day) to understand this as an idle comment or an opening to further conversation or perhaps a way of stating my general satisfaction with life. These are usual elements of any interpreter's prior theories. If I then ran out of the room and onto the roof to check a bank of atmospheric meters, my conversation partner would learn something about me and my habits and so how to interpret my "It's a nice day!" Now that statement would include a meaning along the lines of, "I must go right now and check my data!" They could not have known this in advance, but have revised their passing theory to include an understanding particular to myself that will be included in the interpreter's prior theory for future dealings with me.

We expect this type of revision both as speakers and interpreters. But as Davidson stresses, any one revision does not necessarily determine that we possess a better theory for the next event. The provision, or necessity, of clues in interpreting intentional meanings (whether we wish to call these utterance meaning, speaker's meaning or authorial meaning) guarantees the possibility of new or constant revision. The next time I express "It's a nice day!" I could be referring to finally having a reprieve from a rainy spell. There is nothing in the previous revision of the prior theory for me as a speaker that determines this meaning. Further clues within the new event are required.

Let us extend this example. If the pastime of hobby meteorology swept the country with an emphasis on fair weather data, then it would become conceivable that my previously idiosyncratic meaning for "It's a nice day!" would become general

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid.* 440

usage. In this case, this meaning would be an element of prior theories of interpreters for most speakers. It would take on the qualities of conventional meaning, what Davidson terms normal or standard first meaning in “Derangement”, and perhaps find its way into dictionaries. This is just the progression we find in metaphor usage, from live to dead metaphors. Though in metaphor it is a quality of figurative expression which becomes unproblematic (or robbed of symbolic effect) and this example presents a way the world is in terms of behaviour, the processes are the same: from idiosyncratic and difficult/surprising to general and accepted/expected.

Though our hypothetical phrase cannot accurately be called metaphorical, it serves to illustrate two points. One is Davidson’s description of communication through prior and passing theory interaction. This is to note that it is strategy combined with a truth theory for a speaker (which includes expectations and general knowledge of our environment and conversation partners) that enable communication. The other is that there is a dynamic that is always in play within communication, a constant revision and renegotiation of our truth theories. As above, we can say this is a scalar relation between difficult and expected meaning. The unexpected and difficult must be interpreted whether it is metaphor, misuse, new use etc. The expected (expected to be shared and actually being shared) is simply what we term conventional.

There could be many ways of drawing such an oppositional scale. A tension between radically interpretative and semantically available can be useful, for example. This captures the same sense of the dynamic in focus. But in order to continue to analyze how we grasp meaning, I wish to identify it as an opposition between stable and unstable positionings of truth conditions. Metaphor can, and often does stand for the large group of linguistic usages that seem to resist clear semantic analysis: irony, analogy, allegory, simile, metonymy, etc. Metaphor will be used thus as an example of the instability in language that frames the possibility of literal meaning and convention, while not adhering to the common positing of metaphor as the opposite of literal meaning.

So, the prior/passing theory relation describes communication in the only sphere it obtains: the interactive event, the relation between a speaker, interpreter and

the world.<sup>75</sup> It is context bound and dynamically specific to that (temporal) context. But there is still a remainder within our equation, the issue of literal meaning. Claims for literal meaning remain pressing: that it was context independent, conveyed a cognitive content that was either true or false and had a closed catalogue of interpretations that was standard or ordinary. These claims need to be evaluated in terms of what this scalar relation of stable and unstable truth conditions can inform us of.

From the explanation to this point, it would seem contradictory that one of Davidson's themes in "Derangement" is that "we must pry apart what is literal in language from what is conventional or established."<sup>76</sup> But the apparent contradiction vanishes if we accept a certain recursive definition of literal. To employ a quotation from "Derangement", this definition could be formulated thus:

- 1) "Every deviation from ordinary usage, as long as it is agreed upon for the moment, ... is... what the words mean on that occasion. Such meanings, transient though they may be, are literal."<sup>77</sup>
- 2) All repeated and codified uses of agreed upon meanings are literal meanings.
- 3) Nothing else is a literal meaning.

By applying the context of agreement as the generator of literal meaning,<sup>78</sup> we escape the trivial circularity of dictionary entries which go no farther than defining literal as not figurative or not metaphoric. This also sheds light on the connection between literal meaning and conventional meaning. Literal meaning appears as a result of successful communication, providing the guarantee for the emergence of the conventional.

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<sup>75</sup> It should be said that these three elements are not to be understood in any restrictive sense. An individual can at one and the same time inhabit the roles of speaker and interpreter, or a book could be seen as a speaker. A body of knowledge could also be said to take the role of world in interpretative triangulation.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.* 434

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.* 442

<sup>78</sup> This does not imply that a speaker does not know what he may utter, or know that it is literal. How soliloquy is treated along the same theoretical lines is addressed in further chapters.

Literal, as the common understanding of the concept tells us, refers to the stable quality of a meaning. This stability can well be fleeting, but it has been established for at least a time within a conversation event. Saying that it is fleeting need not be contradictory. For an utterance to be understood demands it be located in an interpreters frame of reference. In Davidsonian terms, we should say this: for a sentence to be understood demands that its truth conditions take a position in regards to other sentences in the interpreter's theory of truth for that speaker. It is in this regard that it is stabilized; it has been assigned a location. This is a necessary element of the alterations occurring in the passing and prior theories, synchronic agreement.

In language use there emerges a transitory literalness, what Bjørn T. Ramberg terms synchronic as opposed to the diachronic generalizations of standard usage. To quote at length:

We do not, usually, consciously ponder the literal meaning of assertions made in our own language. But if we want to make theoretically explicit the meaning of sentences of our own language—if we ask how we know we are speaking the same language—then radical interpretation ... comes into play. Still, in a normal speech situation, this will not happen, for here conventional strategies, not the construction of a truth-theory, determine what truth-conditions we attach to utterances. The point is this: in so far as we are speakers of a language, the truth conditions of the sentences of that language are conventionally taken for granted. But linguistic meaning does not essentially involve conventions.<sup>79</sup>

Davidson's denial of the conventional necessity of communication is based on his understanding of the radically interpretative side of the communication scale, the synchronic. He is correct in that while literal meanings can be systematic and shared, "the passing theory cannot in general correspond to an interpreter's linguistic competence."<sup>80</sup> What the speaker and interpreter share in the development of passing theories is not prior knowledge. It is specific to the conversation it is created within, and does not stand in a dependent relation to conventional meanings.

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<sup>79</sup> Ramberg, Bjørn T., *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989) 111

<sup>80</sup> Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," *Truth And Interpretation*, 442

Semantically, if a sentence is understood (to the best of our capabilities) in the way a speaker intended, it should be called literal. This ultimately says nothing about how many ways there may have been of understanding or interpreting that sentence. Nor does it, as we have seen, provide for the same interpretation when repeated. The context may well be different or different aspects of the context may be alluded to in the second utterance. There is also no sign determining that the sentence so understood is conventional. That is a judgment dependant on the linguistic competence of the conversation partners (that element of competence that would entail broad comprehension of how others speak plus, of course, some understanding of the concept of convention). Thus, in understanding an utterance, it is assigned a stable position in a frame of reference that may vanish when the context of the utterance vanishes.

So while convention does not exhaust linguistic meaning, it is equivalent to the cognitive shortcuts we all take to make communication as seamless as it often is. Codified agreement<sup>81</sup>, springing originally from radically interpretative events, makes up the mass of conventionality we commonly assume is a language, what we wish to invoke when standard or normal meaning is alluded to. Saying that literal meaning is not dependent on convention therefore does not mean there is no relation. The relation *is* one of dependency in the opposite direction. Literal meanings are necessary for convention to develop. All conventional meanings are in this way, literal.

### 3.3 Everyday instability and invitation

Describing concepts of literal meaning and conventional meaning as interpersonally stabilized truth conditions exhausts what we understand. It is a way of illustrating the act of understanding or comprehending an utterance. But not all utterances are understood, easily understood or constant in their comprehension.

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<sup>81</sup> It could be clearer to think of concepts like ‘accord’ rather than agreement in most cases. Like the term ‘positioning’ commented on above, agreement is a factor of understanding, not usually a considered judgment. We rarely (outside of theoretical pursuits) ask each other if we’ve understood what is being said.

What we successfully communicate should be appreciated in parallel with what resists positioning, the unstable dynamic of language use.

We could say that this is everything that is not literal. But that would be no more satisfying than the definition we began with, the circular dictionary definition. What needs to be said is that this relation is a process. As mentioned, a process that is the same as how a metaphor dies. A novel utterance is presented and understood, perhaps in a vague way. This vagueness, through repeated use stabilizes and enters the lists of expected meanings.

Not that all unstable elements of language are equally unstable. Ambiguity, for example, has a limited instability that is conventional in nature. How difficult an exchange may be is a gradated quality, dependent on much more than what the words themselves supposedly mean. Our knowledge, expectations, mood, hearing all play instrumental roles in determining meaning.

If we accept that literal meaning is truth conditionally stable, and metaphor is truth conditionally unstable, why are they not to be seen as poles on a semantic availability scale? Mainly because of the contingency of individual language users that makes any determination of difficulty or accessibility of any utterance entirely dependent on the communicative act. As we have seen, even in the case of our relatively benign “it’s a nice day” example, the meaning of the phrase is determined within the context of utterance.

This is how the claim of a closed catalogue of meaning for literal meanings fails. That any previously determined meaning could be destabilized is a trivial observation, but one that should not be overlooked.<sup>82</sup> What is at issue is not that we commonly do alter accepted meanings but that there is no way of knowing if we have until there is agreement over a meaning. There is no way of predetermining what a speaker means, even though after what they have said is understood we normally apply the understanding retroactively.

The judgments that label certain utterances as metaphoric, figurative, ironic, etc., do not preempt this basic semantic situation. We understand the metaphor, and

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<sup>82</sup> Not that any random collection of words can create meaningful statements, metaphoric or otherwise, as is often noted. But why should this claim for destabilization refer to random symbolizations that appear to be language use? We should not discount intentionality (and normativity) even in our thought experiments if we wish to remain topical.

understanding it *as* a metaphor is merely another aspect to how it is positioned within a frame of reference. We acknowledge its unstable nature while at the same time stabilizing it within the conversation. Otherwise it would not be a metaphor it would be nonsense. It would not have been understood at all. In other words, it becomes literal in the comprehension of it.

Metaphor, then, should not be seen as the counter to literal meaning. The hypothetical counter to literal meaning is nonsense, utterances which defy any positioning, any stability. It is instead convention that presents itself as the opposite of metaphor due to the process by which a phrase can cease to be problematic and so cease to demand interpretation. The metaphoric quality that is an aspect of understanding the novel statement becomes forgotten or unimportant. This process has more to do with language users than with the qualities of sentences or propositions themselves.

We have sought to illuminate Davidson's desire, in "What Metaphors Mean": to deny an exceptional status to metaphor. Ultimately not by reducing it to literal meaning, but as is shown by the prior/passing theory development, by identifying both metaphoric and literal meaning within the dynamic relations of communication, agreement and codification that we are involved with all the time. Certain points must be abandoned from "What Metaphors Mean", in the end strengthening Davidson's position. The equating of metaphors to bumps on the head, for example, has only served to further mystify how metaphors work. This type of brutal causality, endorsed by philosophers such as Richard Rorty, must give way to the more explanatory conception of the relative semantic stability of meaning. Thus finding common ground with other students of metaphor such as Max Black. Truth conditions for sentences retain their explanatory roles but must be seen to apply to all sentences, not just those conventionally termed literal, due to the necessity of identifying truth conditions prior to the labeling of a sentence's content.

Conventional meanings (such as dictionary entries) are merely generalizations involving greater realms of agreement from repeated individual communicative events (consider how late in western history the Oxford English Dictionary was compiled, and that it was done by soliciting and evaluating quotation entries). These generalizations interact only as clues to meaning or first meanings. These clues are

the standard evaluation of truth conditions and are accepted without question in the absence of contextual reasons to think otherwise. But what we hold as true, or valid conditions for evaluation is constantly in revision within the use of language in the interpretative event. There is no language without communication and there is no abstract communication. As Davidson says, “we always have the interpreter in mind; there is no such thing as how we expect, in the abstract, to be interpreted.”<sup>83</sup>

Any deviation, be it metaphor, misuse or ignorance, is a candidate for literalness based solely upon the wealth of the interpreter’s and speaker’s prior theories and the interpreter’s strategy for understanding the clues provided by the speaker within the communication event. The outcome of this is, then, that the idea of cognitive content, the expression of a fact, can apply neither to metaphor nor literal utterance on its own. For even a standard literal sentence, if not understood by an interpreter, expresses no fact. Content is a quality of comprehension, regardless of the vehicle employed.

A good example of this can be a random quotation from James Joyce. Joyce is often held as an example of the malleability of language and comprehension, but in this case it is not the author but myself as a reader that generates the instability. From the burial scene in *Ulysses*: “Yes, Menton. Got his rag out that evening on the bowling green because I sailed inside him. Pure fluke of mine: the bias. Why he took such a rooted dislike to me. Hate at first sight.”<sup>84</sup> At first, since I am ignorant of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish gentlemen’s pastimes, this passage has no meaning for me. It appears to contain certain metaphors, but upon the interpretation that they refer to lawn bowling, perhaps, one can assume that they are codified terms. More than the idea that the speaker had angered another bowling enthusiast, content for me is lacking. Do these sentences have cognitive content? Only for someone with the frame of reference expansive enough to position them with some degree of certainty.

If some kind of non-semantic description of metaphor must be insisted on, I suggest that Ted Cohen comes much closer to the target than talk of pictures and bumps on heads. Cohen’s understands metaphor as an “achievement of intimacy”. He lists three aspects: “(1) the speaker issues a kind of concealed invitation; (2) the

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<sup>83</sup> *ibid.* 443

<sup>84</sup> Joyce, James, *Ulysses* (1960, Random House/Bodley Head edition, reprint; London: Penguin Classics, 2000) 146



hearer extends a special effort to accept the invitation; and (3) this transaction constitutes the acknowledgment of a community.”<sup>85</sup> Since context and individuals have been emphasized as the basis of meaning, it is not without value that goals and purposes are mentioned. It is positive to note that non-semantic relations need not be as reductive as the idea that we are nudging each other and pointing at things.

The richness of language use demands that our descriptions attempt to capture its wealth in our explanatory forms. Cohen’s intimacy leads in that direction. This need not be restricted to metaphor; metaphor can just be seen as an extreme example of it. It is contained in all other communicative encounters as well, but as with Ramberg’s diachronic generalizations, Cohen realizes that “in ordinary literal discourse their involvement is so pervasive and routine that they go unremarked.”<sup>86</sup>

When we discard the personified attribution or possession of cognitive content as a quality of sentences or statements, it is easier to see that there is not an epistemic hierarchy within the classifications we apply to meaning. Instead, a scalar relation is revealed, one that demands varying degrees of involvement from those taking part.

Claims that there is a reified part of language that has meaning without context are hollow. Metaphor doesn’t accomplish its semantic feats by having, expressing or conveying a special meaning or cognitive content. But neither does any other aspect of language. Meaning is realized as agreement over language use within interpretation. While this need not be either radical or difficult, since convention in the form of codified agreement provides shortcuts which make understanding, for the most part, automatic, neither can someone arbitrarily point to a codex and call that meaningful without mutual accord. Language is more than the conveyance of facts, and the structure of meaning resembles closely an invitation to conversation.

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<sup>85</sup> Cohen, Ted, “Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy” in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 6

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.* 6

#### 4 No such thing as a language

In the last chapter, the pursuit of the consequences for meaning in Davidson's prior and passing theory scheme has led to a greater appreciation of the dynamism and interpersonal dependency that runs through all levels of language use. In doing so, it brings to our attention to what appears to be a stumbling block in our attempt to present Davidson as a more sober proponent of the types of goals Rorty espouses. The concluding remarks in "Derangement" state, "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed."<sup>87</sup> The absurdity of the first part of this quote leads to overlooking the second part, causing further difficulties in understanding this as applicable only from within Davidson's view of communication. This may not be as irrational, though, as it is radical, if one is careful to understand it in the context of what it is Davidson is trying to explain: that the traditional idea of a language is too static to account for the complexities of actual language use.

The idea of a strategy that Davidson offers as a substitution for the traditional view is just the ability to communicate. He says that, "This characterization of linguistic ability is so nearly circular that it cannot be wrong: it comes to saying that the ability to communicate by speech consists in the ability to make oneself understood, and to understand."<sup>88</sup> He maintains that this is adequately described by the theoretical introduction of prior and passing theories into communicative triangulation. In "Derangement," this is detailed by reference to language users who have an idiolect and already formulate functioning prior theories, without a clear idea of just what it is this entails.

Michael Dummett is a sympathetic reader of Davidson, and is of help in a further exploration of what a strategy for communication along Davidson's lines can look like. In doing so, we will respond to Dummett's criticisms of Davidson, partially by replacing talk of idiolect with a concept of a semantic repertoire. This will involve a proposal for applying the prior/passing theory scheme to first language acquisition

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<sup>87</sup> Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," *Truth And Interpretation*, 446

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.* 445

as well as a clarification of what it is that language users share in light of the possible implications of atomization in Davidson's vision.

#### 4.1 Repertoire and 'parent language'

Davidson's development of a theory of meaning is not readily accessible and Michael Dummett is correct in noting that Davidson's choice of the terms 'prior' and 'passing' easily lead to confusion. He identifies one such confusion, in Ian Hacking's "The Parody of Conversation", in his own article, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking":

On [Hacking's] account, [the interpreter] begins with a prior theory, which comprises his initial propensities to understand in particular ways whatever [the speaker] may say to him. In the course of the conversation, he revises this theory, the theory that thus evolves being his passing theory. This is not Davidson's picture, however; for he speaks of [the interpreter's] prior theory itself as undergoing modification. Rather, [the interpreter] has, at every stage, both a prior theory and a passing theory, both being subject to continual revision.<sup>89</sup>

Dummett explains that in contrast to the mistaken formulation, the prior theory is a theory of how, in general, the interpreter expects to understand a speaker in a linguistic event, while the "passing theory, on the other hand, is a theory about how to understand specific utterances of [the speaker] made during" that event.<sup>90</sup> The passing theory does enable revisions in the prior theory, but is, moreover, the site of communication. Or as Davidson says, "the prior theory expresses how [an interpreter] is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the

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<sup>89</sup> Dummett, Michael, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking", in *Truth and Interpretation, Perspectives On The Philosophy Of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989) 459

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.* 460

passing theory is how he *does* interpret the utterance.”<sup>91</sup> We could phrase this as the prior theory being communicative expectations and the passing theory as the actualization or revision of those expectations, something that must obtain with each utterance.

It is worth making this point clear due to how Dummett proceeds to get it wrong. In the same article, he assumes that, “Davidson would like us to believe that our whole understanding of another’s speech is effected without having to know anything...[with the]...implication that there is nothing to be learned or mastered.”<sup>92</sup> Dummett believes that to account for the generation of prior theories, a concept of a language is necessary. One that is unlike Davidson’s and much like the traditional view that Davidson argues against: “the idea of a clearly defined structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases.”<sup>93</sup> For simplicity, we will use Dummett’s phrase ‘parent language’ to refer to this formulation. If this traditional view held, it would be difficult to recognize the dynamics of the prior/passing theory scheme as descriptive at all. The generation of prior theories would reduce to a consideration of conventions and rules, and the passing theory could do no more than recognize deviation, not explain successful comprehension in spite of it.

That Davidson says that there is “no such thing” as a language (in the traditional account) to be learned or mastered does not mean that we neither learn nor master anything. Making this leap is a symptom of lacking an appreciation of just how dynamic Davidson’s view of communication is. Davidson’s dependence upon the relations between individual language users is not accidental. There is no abstract communication, there is always someone wanting to be understood and someone doing the understanding. So in order to answer the question as to how prior theories are generated, we must proceed by maintaining the focus on individuals and what it is that they know.

Ultimately, we each know quite a lot, more than we could account for, perhaps. Each language user has a complex history of linguistic interactions at her disposal. This history, by definition, is personal to the point of idiosyncrasy. Taken as a whole, this can easily be referred to as an idiolect, as Davidson does. However,

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<sup>91</sup> Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” *Truth And Interpretation*, 442

<sup>92</sup> Dummett, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking,” *Truth and Interpretation*, 474

<sup>93</sup> Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” *Truth and Interpretation*, 446

in order to emphasize the availability of such histories, I suggest that we introduce the term ‘repertoire’. This has the advantage of intimating our strategies for interpretation, both reflexive and reflective. It also reinforces the necessarily active setting for communication, the interaction of individuals.

The introduction of a concept of repertoire mirrors Davidson’s demand that communication, and so language, must be seen in context of individual’s language use. The repertoire, as a personal semantic field, is the needed individualization of the idea of a ‘logical space of reasons’ we find, for example, in Sellars and McDowell. ‘The logical space of reasons’ is seen in contrast to a realm of uninterpreted nature, a realm of purely causal interaction. Meaning and justification are to be found in the human arena of concepts, reason, and language. Thus, the location of this space must follow Davidson’s location of language: the individual in interaction with other individuals.

Seen in this way, the individuality of a repertoire could be mistaken for an atomistic concept. If each of us has a personal ‘logical space of reasons’ what is left of the intuition of the dualism of this realm and that of causal physicality? It is the idea that each person has a set of understandings, specific to that person, which are necessarily dependent upon the interactions with others that yield shared meanings. A repertoire, then, includes, as we mentioned previously, the mass of previous agreement taking the form of codified use. It is the overlapping of these accepted forms of use that give meaning to the term language community or linguistic convention. This is not problematic for Davidson. As we have seen, he does not deny the existence of conventions, he states correctly, rather, that convention does not suffice to explain successful communication.

Communication is, as Dummett says, “an immensely complex social practice.”<sup>94</sup> The complexity of radical interpretation adequately reflects this, especially in the realization that appeals to convention do not. Issues that Dummett raises, which he says demand a concept of language more static than Davidson’s, fail to resist description by radical interpretation. He offers “the division of linguistic labour, ... the usually ill-defined sources of linguistic authority, ... different modes of

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<sup>94</sup> Dummett, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking”, p 475

speech and the relations between the parent language and various dialects and slangs”<sup>95</sup> as such possibly resistant aspects. Different modes of speech provide difficulties that Davidson has partially taken up in his writings: adjectives, adverbs, belief sentences and the like. These are not shown to pose insurmountable problems. The division of linguistic labour and linguistic authority on the other hand pose no problem at all, and instead can be seen as instrumental explanatory elements in a showing how mastery of language is mastery of communicative strategies.

Like all (non-theoretical) elements to communication, linguistic labour and linguistic authority are routinely talked about, if only indirectly. They are detailed in chains of justification and referred to when needed. But in a Davidsonian perspective, they carry no weight as elements of meaning if they are not known to the interpreter. This may well be what Dummett is referring to, a kind of metaphysical meaning to words. As Davidson replies to this idea:

...I am not impressed by...[the]...insistence that words may have a meaning of which both speaker and hearer are ignorant. I don't doubt that we sometimes say this, and it's fairly clear what we have in mind: speaker and hearer are ignorant of what would be found in some dictionary, or of how people with a better or different education or higher income use the words. This is still meaning based on successful communication, but it imports into the theory of meaning an elitist norm by implying that people not in the right social swim don't really know what they mean.<sup>96</sup>

It is clear, in regards to the assertion that a word may have a meaning the speaker and interpreter are ignorant of, that if one is in a position to state such a claim empirically, they are already a part of the conversation. They are adding to the dynamic in the role of an interpreter, bringing their own personal repertoire to bear on a given sentence or utterance.

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<sup>95</sup> *ibid*

<sup>96</sup> Davidson, Donald, “The Social aspect of Language”, *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) 121 (Davidson states here that this involves both speaker and interpreter while I refer only to the interpreter. This is due to the common example that someone can say something they do not mean, or be interpreted on the basis of background information they are ignorant of.)

It is also clear that appreciating language use as a social practice doesn't entail postulation of something like a 'parent language'. The division of linguistic labour, as Hillary Putnam sets it forth in "The Meaning of 'Meaning'", should show the opposite to be the case through argumentative reference to a "collective linguistic body." But this attempt falls short of the demonstrative power he credits it with. Mainly in that he neglects the importance of a 'collective linguistic body' being ultimately a collection of finite individuals.

The problem with Putnam's formulation is that by pointing to the fact that humans engage (at our stage of social development, in any case) in a division of labour, one is just noticing that humans do various things that involve other humans only vicariously. That I may not be able to conduct tests that would prove empirically that my wedding band was made of gold (to employ Putnam's example) does not require me to accept that there is a meaning to 'gold' that exists independently of anyone. I accept, of course, that for a jeweler or chemist, gold has meaning that for me does not exist other than that I know that, for them, it has such meaning. As Davidson notes: "we can take it to be part of the meaning of an expression that its reference is to be determined by expert opinion. This would demonstrate that a speaker must believe there are experts, but not that there must be."<sup>97</sup> If humans had never cared to develop the practice of chemistry, this meaning, and my recognition that someone understands that meaning in a way I do not, would not exist.

Though not ascribing a purely platonic view to Putnam's argument, the idea of division of linguistic meaning still doesn't extract us from the view of meaning as always meaning *for an* individual. Humans are finite in their acquisition of the particulars of our various social practices while still being aware of such practices. Giving the extension of any term, which Putnam says requires "the sociolinguistic state of the collective linguistic body to which the speaker belongs,"<sup>98</sup> will always be limited by our finiteness. We could take Putnam seriously about this 'collective social body', but this would require the inclusion of, in our search for the extension of a term, all speakers, perhaps through all time, into the inquiry. This would be a fascinating project, though unattainable even for the extension of one term. And an idealized conception of extension not only doesn't help us explain communication nor

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid.* 114

<sup>98</sup> Putnam, Hillary, "The Meaning of 'Meaning,'" in *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 22

entail the idea of a ‘parent language’, but appears only to circularly demonstrate the need for a division of linguistic labour.<sup>99</sup>

If understood in the way described, the ideas of linguistic division of labour and linguistic authority do not entail knowledge not available to an individual involved in communication. We have said that what a language user has at her disposal in communication is a repertoire. By calling a repertoire the individual mass of linguistic encounters, we are saying that it is a collection of all generated prior and passing theories, these being the elements of linguistic events. This takes an explanatory role, answering to Dummett’s objection that something like a ‘parent language’ is needed, if the idea of a repertoire is properly understood as an individual’s evolving project. As with the comprehension of the prior/passing theory scheme, assumptions of torpidity must be avoided; the view is not that a bit of knowledge is acquired and so filed, retrieval being the only further relation. Revision, application and dynamic creation are, in general, constant and involve the repertoire as a whole.<sup>100</sup>

Repertoires are the artifacts of the social practice, and provide for what going on in the same way means. We do not forget that we have made mistakes, and these correctives, absorbed as part of a repertoire, allow for a concept of mastery. The mastery Dummett wants to find of a systematic shared set of rules and conventions is actually the mastery of strategies by which one can use the elements of their repertoire in order for meaning to obtain in communication. It is the enactment of strategies through trial and error, informed guesses or flashes of intuition that forms comprehension against a background of failure. In this way, a repertoire is a set of specific and informative linguistic encounters, not just a set of rules and conventions. As such, it is obviously not something that can be taught us. It is something, like any history, that must evolve over time. It involves the individual’s participation in it

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<sup>99</sup> If Putnam, as he seems to, is actually searching for a semantic justification for a realist concept of truth, his argument remains unconvincing. Separating a speaker’s linguistic competence from extension requires a view of truth as something unattainable, a quality much too close to what he is arguing for to not be circular.

<sup>100</sup> This is not to say that everything is up for revision at any given time. It is merely stressing the point that revision of some part is always going on and that this involves all aspects of the general background.



creation continuously, thus not recognized in an example of mastery such as that of memorizing a grammar text.

This evolutionary project should be seen as initially the induction of an individual into a community of language users; an induction which demands the active participation of the individual at all points. It makes no difference if the community at issue is alien or that of a child's first language; the form is the same though the complexity varies. The earlier description of radical interpretation has already dealt with understanding an alien language. Since our purpose now is to shed light on the origin of prior theories without the assumption of an existing 'parent language', it is first language that we must turn to.

#### 4.2 First language and prior theory

The goal here is not to solve the problem of the complex relation of learning a first language. It is, rather, to give a sketch of how it could be that prior theories are generated from a personal repertoire without the necessity of a 'parent language'. We maintain that this is an instrumental factor in development while explicitly not asserting that this is the totality of what it is to be human.<sup>101</sup> In addition, as in the discussion of a theory of meaning generally, it is not being claimed here that a child wields any of the theoretic concepts presented. It is such that, as Davidson says, "to say that an explicit theory for interpreting a speaker is a model of the interpreter's linguistic competence is not to suggest that the interpreter knows any such theory."<sup>102</sup>

In speaking about a first language, may appear inconsistent to rely upon an idea of what language users share, the assumption being that one cannot participate in

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<sup>101</sup> Repertoire is presented as a semantic concept, say a generalization of the category of linguistic understanding. That it must involve memory is clear, but it must also interact with other systems of being, awareness of time and space, for example, of which it cannot be said call upon semantic notions in engagement (though they must in order to be described). An expansion of the concept of repertoire would become something much like the concept of *habitus* to be found in the works of Mauss, Bourdieu, or Merleau-Ponty. This is the 'social made physical' which accounts for knowing our way around in the world when we include the body as a necessary component in the analysis of what an individual is. It would not appear, though, that any even mildly complex 'embodied knowledge' could avoid a thoroughly semantic dependence.

<sup>102</sup> Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," *Truth and Interpretation*, 438

linguistic events before one has learned enough to do so; that before learning something there is nothing to share. We cannot ignore, of course, that we are similar in all the natural ways that provide for a definition of a species. It is not beside the point to mention this since Davidson's semantics develop from interaction between humans as the type of creatures we are. There *is* language due to how concepts and thought are formed through engagement with our environment. This naturalization is not a reduction, though. It employs concepts such as 'concept', 'truth', 'belief' and 'meaning' as coinciding and mutually supportive elements in the naturally human development of language.

As Davidson says in "Seeing Through Language":

We may be inclined to think that concept formation is more primitive than entering the world of propositional attitudes, the world, in particular, of beliefs. But this is a mistake. ... To have a concept is to *classify* objects or properties or events or situations while understanding that what has been classified may not belong in the assigned class. The infant may never say "Mama" except when its mother is present, but this does not prove conceptualization has taken place, even on a primitive level unless a mistake would be recognized *as* a mistake. Thus there is in fact is no distinction between having a concept and having thoughts with propositional content, since one cannot have the concept of mama unless one can believe someone is (or is not) mama, or wish that mama were present, or feel angry that mama is not satisfying some desire.<sup>103</sup>

We need not completely agree with Davidson's more unfortunate illustrations of causal relations (involving babies, dogs and bathtubs) while still grasping his central point. To have a concept involves knowing how it applies, when it does apply. And the baptism, as Davidson calls it, into the world of meaning happens when we first see that we have applied a concept mistakenly.<sup>104</sup> What we share, then, according to

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<sup>103</sup> Davidson, "Seeing Through Language", *Truth, Language, and History*, 139

<sup>104</sup> The specification of when this moment occurs will always be, to a large degree, arbitrary and dependant on how the individual researcher chooses to identify or characterize it. For our purposes, it is postulated as the necessary self-reflective, intentional factor that separates language use from mere differentiation of stimuli.

Davidson, is the awareness that we can be mistaken as a basis for propositional thought. This is his concept of primitive truth, a naturalized approach to truth that is seen as generative for the appearance of language use.

Davidson has written often of this awareness of error and how it is involved with truth, belief and meaning. The awareness of error, he says, is an “appreciation of the distinction between belief and truth.”<sup>105</sup> These concepts come bundled, presumably involving something like an enlightened intuitive leap. But they do not appear in a vacuum. We can postulate that there is much that exists before this intuitive leap which then becomes ordered and classified with the enactment of propositional thought. It could be said that the world thus begins to take form for the individual. As such it can be seen that a concept of a strategy also begins to take form.

If we accept that the grasping of error entails the concept of belief versus truth, and so an idea of objective truth, then it should also entail the concepts of success or failure. This would ultimately be the outcome of reflection on the intentional focus of having been wrong. That there is someone else that has shown us that we are wrong means both that this individual has mastery of something that we do not, and that we accept that they have this mastery. In this way, a concept of strategy appears through the symbiotic concepts of mastery and authority in the moment one first realizes that they have failed in an attempt at communication. The intentional necessity of propositional thought brings into play a much broader field of conceptual resources than just that of belief, meaning and truth.

So, already at the moment of induction into a language community (however we choose to locate this moment or identify how primitive these resources must be), an individual knows quite a lot. Or, perhaps more to the point, to quote Davidson out of context, “could be brought to acknowledge that they know” the type of relations we are describing. It is not unreasonable either to say that expectations are a part of this new ordering of the cognitive field, what now, since explicitly semantic in nature, can be called a repertoire. There is no reason to demand that this first step be as complex as the description of it makes it seem. Nor should it be understood as a mystical flash of fully formed knowledge. It is, mainly, that the conceptual tools for the complexity

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<sup>105</sup> *ibid.* 141

of language development have, with this step, come within reach if not immediately utilized.

The unpacking of Davidson's induction into propositional thought, then, brings us back to Michael Dummett's objection, as quoted above: "Davidson would like us to believe that our whole understanding of another's speech is effected without having to know anything...[with the]...implication that there is nothing to be learned or mastered."<sup>106</sup> This charge is thus effectively countered. Even at the beginning of language use, there is a wealth of relational concepts that the individual has at her disposal. In addition, if memory is to be taken as a basic cognitive function, these relations will be applied retroactively to order sensations prior to the appearance of a repertoire, and forming the rudimentary base of further development.<sup>107</sup>

This development follows the path of strategy formulation, the outline of Davidson's prior and passing theory scheme. The concept of expectation that we recognize in a baby's desires for food or care can easily be transferred to linguistic expectation once the element of intentionality is introduced through the interaction of error and truth. A child is thus involved in just what Davidson describes as prior and passing theory:

the interpreter's theory has been adjusted to the evidence so far available to him: knowledge of the character, dress, role sex of the speaker, and whatever else has been gained by observing the speaker's behaviour, linguistic or otherwise. As the speaker speaks his piece the interpreter alters his theory, entering hypotheses about new names, altering the interpretation of familiar predicates, and revising past interpretations of particular utterances in the light of new evidence.<sup>108</sup>

There is nothing in this explanation that cannot be said to apply to those who have the limited capacity for language of a young child. We know they are inquisitive, quickly access language patterns and arrive at hypotheses for all types of things in the world.

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<sup>106</sup> Dummett, p 474

<sup>107</sup> This can also shed light on the seemingly paradoxical holistic aspect to Sellars' looks talk by showing a way concepts can develop despite requiring a 'battery of other concepts'.

<sup>108</sup> Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", *Truth and Interpretation*, 441

These hypotheses may be outlandish in our eyes, but they are reasonably inductive when we take into account the beliefs a child holds.

Two things that are informatively absent in applying prior and passing theories to early first language acquisition are conventions and what we could say is a body of knowledge entirely adequate for independent evaluation. The repertoire is not yet sufficiently wide ranging for either of these elements; the world is too new and too unknown. This is the role linguistic authority plays at this stage. As said above, authority and mastery coincide with the concept of strategy (or practice as such). The child accepts the parent as the linguistic authority, perhaps as the sole conversation partner.<sup>109</sup> Conventions thus become established through repeated use and comprehension; a new language community evolves.

We could try to say that the parent is merely transmitting conventional language from the larger language community, but this is not a completely accurate picture. This is due partially to the formation of specifically familial conventions, and partially to the existence and dynamic of dialects. The question remains as to just where the ‘parent language’ is that is being deviated from. As Davidson says in response to the idea of a language, he is “happy to say speakers share a language if and only if they tend to use the same words to mean the same thing.”<sup>110</sup> There will be similarities between the contents of individuals’ repertoires on the basis of repeated successful linguistic interactions. These similarities, it is important to notice, are a consequence of interpretation, they are not a precondition of interpretation. Our grouping of ways of speaking into various, presumably containable languages, such as English, Swahili or Greek, is just the recognition of such similarities. But the boundaries are fuzzy.

One example of this is the Greek spoken in the immigrant neighborhood of Astoria, Queens in New York. There are Greek language schools, Greek speakers, and many generations of this tradition. But the Astoria Greek is a language out of time and has progressed along its own trajectory. It is said that when these Greek-Americans return on holiday to Greece, it is not immediately assumable that they will engage in problem free communication. They speak a Greek derived from how Greek

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<sup>109</sup> It can also be said that linguistic authority plays an increasingly minor role as a person matures. As one develops and accepts one’s mastery of a practice, reliance upon outside authority reduces.

<sup>110</sup> Davidson, “The Social Aspect of Language”, *Truth, Language, and History*, 111

in Greece was spoken in the 1950's. Do they speak Greek? Yes, of course. But not the Greek that is the Greek of Greece. So should we say there are there two languages, or one language and one dialect, or perhaps two dialects of an ideal Greek? Has a Greek-American who chooses to live in Greece for an extended period of time, and so adapts his way of speaking to those around him, learned a new language? These questions are clearly better addressed by Davidsonian dynamics than they are by an appeal to a 'parent language'.

Objections may be raised that we have very detailed and standard forms of language: they can be found in the grammars, dictionaries and writing guideline manuals that are companions to every major world language. The idea is that if one wishes to learn Greek, for example, and was very industrious these companions would suffice for acquisition of the language. There are many ways of refuting this, but we can leave out those that involve fundamental asymmetries between written and spoken language, both historical and structural.

Mentioning that codified grammar and vocabularies are constructs that always lag behind spoken use can be enlightening in a negative manner, but we should see this in terms of radical interpretation. There are two points not to be overlooked: one is that interaction with a text should be seen as involving the same dynamics as verbal communication, though perhaps in a slightly altered form. Therefore exhibiting radical interpretation in the manner of a field linguist.

The other is that if one had taken the time to study all the formal texts on the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of a foreign language, they would still have to engage in communicative interpretation of the form described here in any attempts to use it. They would be able to wield a vastly superior strategy for communication than one who had no familiarity with that language community, but that alone, would not guarantee success. They may know the language in a way that means they have understood a language community's conventions, but it is just Davidson's point to say that this idea does not capture the complexity of communication.

The theoretical shift is from an assumed existent linguistic framework as a tool for communication, a 'parent language', to a concentration on strategies as the tools for managing communication, prior and passing theories. Content becomes seen as derivative on the success of any given strategy. This makes sense; if language is a

constantly evolving process, as our example of immigration and separation helps show, what can we point at to call a language? Or better, when can we freeze the picture, take the collection of linguistic uses at that time in history and call that the standard? A repertoire is the realm of language and of strategy, the only place language obtains. It means that language is intrinsically personal, but, of course, not private. Though we each take our repertoires with us to the grave, they have been formed in the crucible of communication and instrumental in forming the language of others.

Davidson has not given us a fully elaborated theory. But he has provided the theoretical approach and theoretical tools that makes it possible to realize the consequences of his thinking. The traditional view of a language is not needed, even on the grounds that we must explain what it is humans share or risk falling into incoherency. This is because Davidson's account does not lose, but is indeed more firmly based on our fundamental inter-connectivity as the language using creatures we are. This requires full attention to the resources of individuals, but individuals, even at the point of semantic 'baptism', do not lack powerful, if rudimentary, conceptual resources. By grasping the core issues in Davidson's work, an idea of a language community is strengthened while the idea of *a* language dissolves.

#### 4.3 A theory of meaning

I have called Dummett a sympathetic reader of Davidson, but it is clear that he is not in agreement with basic tenets of radical interpretation as he understands it. There are three points in these disagreements that should be mentioned in order to avoid certain general misunderstandings that can arise: what Davidson sees as a theory of meaning, the application of the holistic constraint, and the role of progression in radical interpretation. The first two points being more closely related to each other, and our previous discussion, than the third. I will attend only to Dummett's criticism of Davidson, not Dummett's positive program for a theory of

meaning; this program being mainly a consequence of his rejection of the holistic constraint.<sup>111</sup>

There is a general consensus that a theory of meaning should, as Bilgrami phrases it, answer the question: “What semantic knowledge suffices for the mastery of a given language?” and that they are “intended to specify that knowledge.”<sup>112</sup>

Dummett shares this view and ascribes it to Davidson in his “What is a Theory of Meaning? (II).” Dummett states that, “what we seek is a theoretical representation of a practical ability. Such a theoretical representation of the mastery of an entire language is what is called by Davidson, and will be called here, ‘a theory of meaning’ for the language.”<sup>113</sup> This is more or less accurate, Davidson has used something like this formulation repeatedly in describing what it is that he hopes radical interpretation accomplishes. It can be found in the opening statements of both “Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages” and “Semantics for Natural Languages”. In the first he writes, “it must be possible to give a constructive account of the meaning of sentences in the language. Such an account I call a theory of meaning for the language.”<sup>114</sup> In the second, as an introduction of a theory of truth as a theory of meaning, he says, “A theory of the semantics of a natural language aims to give the meaning of every meaningful expression.”<sup>115</sup>

But we have seen that on Davidson’s full account of radical interpretation, the accepted concept of a language is brought into doubt. While talk of a ‘language’ should be conditioned, not eliminated, by the appreciation of the prior/passing theory scheme, it does demand an alteration in how the goals of a theory of meaning are expressed. Davidson appears to have been aware of this need, mentioning in “Derangement” that he also had once held the view of language he found himself arguing against in that article.

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<sup>111</sup> For a concise treatment of the difficulties involved with Dummett’s molecular theory of meaning, see Akeel Bilgrami’s “Meaning, Holism and Use” in *Truth and Interpretation*.

<sup>112</sup> Bilgrami, Akeel, “Meaning, Holism and Use,” in *Truth and Interpretation, Perspectives On The Philosophy Of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford, 1989) 102

<sup>113</sup> Dummett, Michael, “What is a Theory of Meaning? (II),” in *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 36

<sup>114</sup> Davidson, “Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages”, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 3

<sup>115</sup> Davidson, “Semantics for Natural Languages”, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 55



He specifies the change in his later writings by just this, how he emphasizes the goal of radical interpretation. This is perhaps clearest in “Derangement”, and quoted in the article “The Social Aspect of Language”, which is a reply to Dummett’s criticism of “Derangement”. He states it thus:

claims about what would constitute a satisfactory theory are not, as I said, claims about the propositional knowledge of an interpreter ... They are rather claims about what must be said to give a satisfactory description of the competence of the interpreter.<sup>116</sup>

This is not to be seen as a change in Davidson’s theory per se. It is a development and a logical consequence of radical interpretation, undeniable after “Derangement”, which is to be found through the bulk of Davidson’s work. The difference it makes is not in the project so much as in the understanding of it.

I mean by this, that a concentration on the competence of an interpreter refines the general goal of a theory of meaning while providing for adequate grounds for rebuttal of certain criticisms of the Davidsonian project. In this case, we can see that Dummett’s attachment to the general statement of a theory of meaning appears to fuel his anti-holism. To demand of a theory of meaning that it gives “what a speaker knows when he knows a language,”<sup>117</sup> as Dummett phrases it, is a different type of demand than detailing one’s competence as a language user. This demand is just that which Davidson in the above quote stipulates is not a goal of a theory of meaning, to detail the propositional knowledge of a language user.

Aside from the empirical impossibility of actually surveying such a field of knowledge (due to both the privileged and testimonial based form of it, plus the open ended quality to natural languages), we can see that it requires a view of language as something that can be removed from the individual context, the ‘parent language’ argued against in the first part of this chapter. This assumption, here built into the criteria of a theory of meaning, conflates the engagement in a social practice with the description of that practice, a confusion that Dummett levels as a charge against Davidson. To overcome this confusion requires greater attention to what Bilgrami

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<sup>116</sup> Davidson, “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” 438

<sup>117</sup> Dummett, *ibid.* 36

calls theoretical distance, or in Davidson's Tarskian manner, the theoretical expansion of a language.

In addition to the assumption of a 'parent language,' it is the lack of attention to this theoretical distance between the practice of language and the description of that practice which leads to the problematic claims Dummett makes for semantic holism. If we are operating with a reified notion of language, it is clear that holism will devolve into absurdity. The confusion is this: a reified view of language places a demand on holism to simultaneously fix the reference of all the terms of the language. As Dummett rightly states in regards to this misunderstanding, "when we try to take seriously the idea that the references of all names and predicates of the language are determined simultaneously, it becomes plain that we are thereby attributing to a speaker a task quite beyond human capacities."<sup>118</sup>

But it is only from within the assumption of a language existing "out there" that the idea of knowing a language, consisting in having determined all the meanings of the constituent parts, can have any application. This is what enables Dummett to draw the conclusion that, "the adoption of a holistic view of language renders the construction of a systematic theory of meaning impossible."<sup>119</sup> It is also the idea behind Dummett's view that, "An actual theory of meaning would specify the meaning of every expression of the language directly."<sup>120</sup> But this is just the conflation of the practice with the description of it that he says he disavows. It allows Dummett to speak of a speaker's "imperfect grasp" of a theory of meaning by somehow assuming that there could be experts who have a perfect grasp.

With these ideas, we have strayed far from the conception of a theory of meaning providing a description of a speaker's competence. If proper distance is maintained between the theoretical description and the practice itself, we won't be tempted, with Dummett, to require that a theory of meaning provide a semantic topography of all actual and possible uses of words by a community of language users. The holism that Dummett argues against sounds much like this demand that he himself places on a theory of meaning. Instead we should stress that the holism demanded in radical interpretation is part of the denotation of the practical ability of

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<sup>118</sup> Dummett, *ibid.* 29

<sup>119</sup> Dummett, *ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 464

assigning meaning to any given utterance. Thus, the content of the holistic understanding will always be an individual's command of whatever fragment of language they have mastered.

The theoretical use of the term 'language' cannot specify that knowledge, only a language user manifesting it within utterances and understandings can. By relativizing language to individuals (speaking in the same ways or not), the demands on a theory of meaning are relaxed by just that distance needed to separate description from practice. Holism does not play its role in our theoretical understanding, but in our use of language as language users, the individuals communicating *s* at time *t*. Holism may thus not be as grand as many wish it to be, but it does much more theoretical heavy lifting because of it. Fears concerning the role of things we do not know or have forgotten need not arise. They are not included in Davidson's holism. The expansion or contraction of an individual's knowledge could only be said to effect the holistic relation of that knowledge to itself if somehow we lost enough mastery to be said to have lost language use altogether.

It is expansion that is our third point, the progression of language.<sup>121</sup> Dummett has doubts about what radical interpretation can say about how language changes, based partially on his view of holism and partially on the conception that Davidson "make[s] expression of meaning depend wholly upon the intentions of the speaker, and thus to liberate speakers from all responsibility to the language as a social institution."<sup>122</sup> I believe we have addressed the fact that holism does not demand a static or closed view of language use.

Concerning responsibility, it is difficult to read Davidson as endorsing a view of a speaker as disconnected from the social sphere. He repeatedly argues for the necessity of the social or public creation of meaning. It is also difficult to understand what responsibility to an abstract relation could be. We can be responsible to each other, or to ourselves, in that we desire to communicate, something that I argue Davidson stresses in his writings. "Derangement" itself can be read as a complete

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<sup>121</sup> Perhaps it is worth noting that 'progression' should not be read here as an endorsement of the notion of 'progress' in any qualitative way. It is more to the point to see it as change, expansion or alteration. We lose knowledge, in the form of our semantic connections to the world as steadily as we gain new relations. Whether this is positive or negative cannot be read from the semantic interrelations themselves.

<sup>122</sup> Dummett, *ibid* p 473

refutation of Humpty Dumpty in the episode related between himself and Alice, not an embrace of it as Dummett would have.

What is at issue, though, is that Davidson has not written about the progression of language. Earlier, we attempted to show how radical interpretation could function within the acquisition of a first language. Equally, if not more, important in describing language use is the fluid and constantly changing form of engagement with it. Davidson, for the most part, has developed radical interpretation out from the position of speakers and interpreters that have already mastered a language and employ that mastery set to communicate. But this approach does not rule out progression, and as I hope to show in the next chapter, radical interpretation has provided us with the theoretical understanding necessary to flesh out this most vital aspect of language use, and so, perhaps a theory of meaning with the richness to reflect natural language.

## **5 Confrontation with the unknown**

Throughout this study, I have been emphasizing certain conceptions of language use over others: dynamism, holism and individuality as vital aspects of linguistic community (in a strong generative sense) rather than reified, deterministic, segmented and context independent views of what communication involves. This emphasis is identified as Davidson's radical interpretation and has required exploration of the consequences of taking his views seriously within the framework of his own writings: the description of the competence of an interpreter. At this point, it is fitting to expand upon Davidson's formulation by seeing the interpreter and the speaker as one and the same language user, something that is intimated throughout the bulk of the literature. Taking this intuitive, and foreshadowed, step is an entrance to an investigation of the universality and progressive nature of natural language.

We have seen three major application arenas in the development of radical interpretation: the relations between an alien object language and known metalanguage, an object language as contained in a metalanguage, and so the dynamics of the communicative moment between a speaker and interpreter. All discussion up to now of interpretation has presupposed a speaker and/or interpreter with mastery of a language (or rather a generative strategy for interpretation embedded in a repertoire). Roughly, the universality identified as a quality of a natural language has been that of infinite possibilities of creating and comprehending novel sentences based on a finite vocabulary, grammar and syntax. But a necessary factor in calling natural language universal is progression. Progression is the introduction of new entities and concepts into the ontology of our language, the constructive thinking of things that have not been thought of before.

An explanation of the progression of language lies at the root of our original problem. There is a fear that linguistic explanations of reality deny that the world is larger than language, that everything *is* language. To assuage this suspicion demands an account of how language expands and creates new knowledge, not just re-interpretations of previous knowledge. This is to say that, though our understanding and apprehension of the world is linguistically and conceptually bound, we are not bound fast by our language use or concepts. There is a manner in which the recursive

and self-referential dynamics of language do not entail a closed system, this being an important recognition of the universality of natural languages.

This appreciation of universality indicates how the discussion up to this point could be read as endorsing a closed linguistic apparatus. The commitment to comprehension as a necessarily linguistic relation, and language being a social practice, says nothing explicit about how language succeeds in its own alteration. The triangulation within radical interpretation clearly elaborates the public, shared aspect to language but seemingly restricts the possibility of communication (and awareness) to some number of language users equal to or greater than two. And of these (at least) two, one always has knowledge of something that the other is attempting to understand; someone's already existing frame of reference is always seen as the unknown. This may be clearest in our example of a child's first language: ignorance becoming knowledge through guidance. But, then, where does the truly novel occur?

We could say that the factor of indeterminacy relates language use to kind of semantic example of the children's game of 'telephone.' That small misunderstandings lead to the alteration of meaning as it travels through repeated communicative events. It is not unlikely that something like this does occur, though minimal due to the corrective restrictions of the physical world's role in triangulation. This gradual change, though, does not explain the appearance of full novelty such as scientific hypothesis and theories, the postulation of novel elements in the world. In these cases, as those who develop such hypotheses and theories, we face the unknown as what it is, something not known previously in anyone's frame of reference.

Thus, a fourth arena is introduced for applying radical interpretation: the individual's solitary meetings with the world, the outcome of the activity of inquiry. In this way we will approach inquiry as a special example of an individual's learning process. As with our previous examples (the hypothetical interpretation of an alien language, the issue of interpretation in literal meaning, and the postulated learning of a first language), inquiry is the extreme case that provides for a clear view of the overall scalar relation of the various unknowns one encounters all the time. Without the direct aid of independent linguistic elements, such as direct interaction with others or the writings of others, inquiry involves the individual and the world. Not that this breaks with Davidson's triangulation. Instead, this requires the apparently trivial step of postulating an internalized triangulation relation.

In order to clearly position this example of the unknown in relation to other aspects of language learning and use, we will first look again at the conceptual consequences of Davidson's naturalized truth. This will entail an evaluation of how Davidson treats skepticism and that treatment's relation to Wittgenstein's understanding of knowledge. This will aid in locating inquiry on the border of the conceptually unknown, providing for a frame for the discussion when we return to the concept of metaphor as described in chapter 3. Through attention to skepticism, metaphor and doubt this chapter will inject a general understanding of instability into Davidson's truth conditional semantics. This will begin to give a richer theoretical picture of natural language by allowing development of the intuitive and necessary realization that language is much more than consideration of the true and the false.

### 5.1 Naturalizing skepticism

After a reconsideration of his position in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," Davidson came to agree with Rorty that, in his words, "I should not pretend that I am answering the skeptic when I am really telling him to get lost."<sup>123</sup> 'Telling him to get lost' is just to say that the conditions necessary for communication offer no space for the skeptical project to get off the ground. If this holds, then skeptical doubts as to our obtainment of knowledge are empty enough as to demand no engagement. This is quite different from having presented grounds for knowledge, something that would be said to answer the skeptic. Davidson's opinion is that his account of communication is enough to rid us of the skeptic without meeting him on his own terms, since a general justification of knowledge claims is not needed.<sup>124</sup>

Davidson's view is not overly complicated, though it assumes a basic agreement with his semantics. Mainly, that contemplation of what a belief is leads us to objective truth, the view that belief is veridical. The *fact* of successful communication confirms our causal connections to the world around us. This is not to imply that all of our beliefs are true or that we cannot be wrong. But without the

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<sup>123</sup> Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 154

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.* 157

predominance of what we believe being true and assumed shared by our conversation partners, no communication is possible.

It is the irreducibility of the concepts of belief, meaning and truth to one another, the holistic mechanism of radical interpretation, which clarifies the argument. The skeptic begins by asking how certain beliefs, or classes of belief, can be proven to hold true. Davidson says that this arises from a mistaken impression of the interaction of our central semantic concepts. He says, “we can’t, in general first identify beliefs and meanings and then ask what caused them. The causality plays an indispensable role in determining the content of what we say and believe.”<sup>125</sup> Thus the skeptic, in accepting an *understanding* of the expression of a class of beliefs, has already derailed the thrust of doubting the causes of those beliefs.

To reiterate from chapter two, ‘holding true’ is a condition of the interpretation of a speaker’s belief and the meaning of her utterances. As we have seen in the example of the interpretation of a speaker of an alien language, prompted assent is the entrance into the self-referential relation of belief and meaning. As Davidson says, it is the marker of “the causal relation between assenting to a sentence and the cause of such assent.” He continues thus:

a speaker’s assent to a sentence depends both on what he means by the sentence and on what he believes about the world. Yet it is possible to know that a speaker assents to a sentence without knowing what the sentence, as spoken by him, means, or what belief is expressed by it. <sup>126</sup>

So within communicative triangulation, the attempted skeptical elimination of the accepted causal relation of prompted assent (or holding true) cannot find a foothold. While assent is possible to identify without yet ascertaining the meaning of an utterance or its corresponding belief, to have a belief or to mean something already necessitates an acceptance of the causal relation to be found in prompted assent. It is here that the necessity is apparent. To seriously deny this relation would demand that we lose the comprehension of existing beliefs and meanings: the unrealistic proposal

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<sup>125</sup> *ibid.* 150

<sup>126</sup> *ibid.* 147



that we could suddenly, through doubt, relinquish the contents of our beliefs and thereby cease to be language users.<sup>127</sup>

So we wind up with telling the skeptic to get lost rather than answering him. Rorty phrased it in a more sober vein as: “It would have been better to have said that [Davidson] was going to offer the skeptic a way of speaking which would prevent him from asking his question.”<sup>128</sup> If any given skeptic (assuming there are actually such consistent enduring individuals) was convinced by Davidson and Rorty, then perhaps these statements would carry the authority they credit them. In such a case it is genuinely believable that, as Rorty says, the skeptical question would never arise; seeing, as it were, the prevention mentioned as a kind of philosophic prophylactic. The problem with this is the observation that skepticism is not an embodied philosophy to be defeated; it is more like a cautionary state of mind.

‘To prevent’ thus takes on a different contextual relation. If a question is already present, it makes little sense to pretend that we can use a chain of reasoning to retroactively cause the question to not have pressed itself forward. Preventing the question, then, is actually suppressing the question, ultimately a way of *answering* the skeptic. It shows itself to be a way of answering the skeptic by refusing to address the proposition. This contains more than a hint of language legislation or desire for reform, a strong resemblance to Wittgenstein’s views in the *Tractatus*.

Among his concluding remarks in that study we find the same appreciation of skeptical thought as in Davidson and Rorty: that the questions cannot be asked. Since his view is that the skeptic is speaking nonsense, Wittgenstein offered that when one is confronted with the metaphysical (of which the skeptic invariably speaks), one should “demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his

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<sup>127</sup> With sympathy for Sellars’ Myth of Jones, I see this line of argument as taking an other-minds skeptic as parasitical on the evidence transcendent one. Whether the skeptic is challenging a conversation partner or he is challenging himself, the relation between belief and cause remains the same. Anita Avramides, on the other hand [“Davidson and the new sceptical problem” in Donald Davidson: Truth, meaning and knowledge, ed. Urszula M. Zeglen (London: Routledge, 1999, 136-154) 150] sees Davidson as showing that “knowledge of another mind is conceptually central to all our knowledge.” Ultimately, taking Davidson seriously on knowledge can support both views since he claims no primacy to any of the elements of triangulation.

<sup>128</sup> Rorty, Richard, “Pragmatism, Davidson And Truth,” in *Objectivity, relativism, and truth: Philosophical papers* (1991; Reprint, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 138

propositions.”<sup>129</sup> Though the formal reference in this statement should not be overlooked (and not to imply that Davidson expresses it formally thus), I believe that Davidson means his argument to capture the sentiment. There is the implication that the incoherency of the skeptic that Davidson points to could just as well be termed nonsense, whether in a Fregeian or colloquial manner. And as we saw within the shifting context of Rortian prevention, this is still an exchange with the skeptic, a response to an already formulated question.

The alignment continues, in that Wittgenstein uses his above statement as grounds for affirming: “[w]hat we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”<sup>130</sup> If we are speaking about nothing, speaking nonsense, then this response is just word-choice away from telling the skeptic to get lost, the refusal to discuss the skeptic’s doubts. In asserting that we cannot speak of a certain class of propositions there is implicitly claimed that the totality of the proper field of linguistic application is known. The line separating sense from nonsense is drawn in the sand, and even if it cannot always be clearly demarcated in advance, we must certainly know nonsense when we see it.

This is not an alien concept. It proves appealing time and again, in various forms. To name just a few we need not look far. Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, would rather speak of scientific propositions. This is an always-popular candidate with those who desire a hardheaded understanding of the world, one usually based on some form of reduction. The Vienna Circle gave us the historically stereotypical form in the positivist project. Quine and his love of science gave us observation sentences. I would also claim that Rorty in his attempts to get us to stop talking about truth or epistemology embodies the same *geist*, for all of his anti-reductionist rhetoric. And time and again people refuse to stop speaking of just those realms of human thought which are claimed empty, unknowable, meaningless or without sense. If there are identifiable limits to what we can or cannot know, these philosophical attempts have not succeeded in mapping them in any convincing way.

Despite telling the skeptic to get lost or asserting that we must only speak about what we *can* speak about, skeptical inclinations remain. One reason as to why

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<sup>129</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (1921; Reprint, London: Routledge Classics, 2003) (§ 6.53) 89

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.* (§ 7) 89

we do not succeed in wishing or legislating away skeptical doubts lies at the heart of Davidson's semantics. As a counterpart to his naturalized truth, there also appears a naturalized skepticism. In returning to the 'baptismal moment' of our induction into language use, the first realization of that we could be wrong, we see that it also introduces (or rather, rationally leads to) the concept that 'I could be wrong about everything'. The appearance of this thought with the rash of other relational concepts entailed by Davidson's naturalized truth doesn't make it any more coherent, but it does make it appear natural enough. Similar to how justification was discussed earlier, our thoughts slide to the extreme end of relational scales, giving them the appearance of demanding (and so the possibility of) a positive response.

Such doubt is as primary as the concept of truth. They are fundamentals of our general reasoning and while they should be linked to the skeptical proposition, we must say that it is obvious that we need not develop a skeptic's challenge from "I could be wrong" or even "I could be wrong about everything." The flights of philosophers' skeptical thought experiments are not general knowledge, and we know they often come as a shock for non-philosophers. Holding the concept of possible relations to brains and vats is not a condition of being a language user, for example. It is equally obvious, though, that a skeptic's challenge to how we know what we know could not be formulated without the prior development of "I could be wrong about everything." This is the basic concept built on by hypotheses such as "I could be a brain in a vat."

Both "I could be wrong about everything" and the skeptic's question, "How do I know I am not just a brain in a vat?" want to say something about what we cannot know. Such questions posit situations we cannot know in any positive sense in order to cast doubt on what we do know. The leading thought stops at the doubt itself, not implying that we could not ascertain what we are wrong about. The second is the generalization of this thought. It says, "We could be wrong about everything." For the former, there remains the possibility that someone better informed could correct us in our general mistake, perhaps never necessitating an evaluation of the lines of anti-skeptical reasoning that have been explored. The vat hypothesis, though, would rob us of the possibility of an authoritative correction and so demand a justification of our knowledge claims and, eventually, an answer as to why this type of problem emerges.

In light of the apparent ever-present structural possibility, if not necessity, of the skeptic, it is the knowledge claim imbedded in ‘passing over in silence’, or similar statements, that should be questioned. As mentioned, this is the implication that the limits to language use, the proper fields of linguistic application, are known. If there are such fields, then we must be able either to recognize them or recognize the absence of them. In other words, we must be able to know what we can or cannot speak about. The limits of language must be manifest in the refutation of the skeptical claim. This is not to imply that there is not nonsense or that we cannot continue to refute meaningless claims.<sup>131</sup> It is rather an appreciation that the burden of proof the skeptic demands for our knowledge claims reappears in the context of its dismissal.

As with the idea that the skeptic must be incoherent due to his very semantic grasp of our knowledge claims, it cannot be said that we do not understand what the skeptic is saying. We do, without doubt, understand that he is talking about vats and brains and mad scientists, for example. There is no possibility of identifying what we cannot speak of in any categorical way. And on a semantic level, talk about brains and vats is just as sensible as talk of any other knowable items.

So claiming that we can preempt the skeptic because he is speaking nonsense falls short of its goal if we mean that nonsense refers to a sentential semantic relation. It also falls short if it is meant in a colloquial way. If the point is that the claim does not cohere with other beliefs, then a refutation is both possible and necessary. In neither case is a limit demarcated for what can or cannot be spoken of. There is a claim to know something that cannot be known. But showing this is not a strengthening of the skeptic’s challenge. Rather, we must continue to see the skeptic as also venturing to say something about what cannot be known.

The important relation is that we can only conceive of, or express the theoretical postulated unknowable, such as the possibility that all of our beliefs about the world are false simultaneously, on the basis of things we do know: brains, vats

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<sup>131</sup> As with sense and meaning, nonsense and the meaningless must be evaluated in relation to speakers and interpreters. The negative counterparts to our semantic terms do not escape the contextual dependence that informs the positive terms.

and scientists.<sup>132</sup> This shows how the global skeptic is internally incoherent. To truly postulate the unknowable is to postulate something of which no description is possible. It may carry the possibility to theoretically enlighten, but would appear to have no content with which to function as a challenge.

It was said before that by just comprehending sentences in a language, the skeptic could not challenge the causal, and so veridical nature of belief. That view is valid if one accepts Davidson's theoretical commitments. This incoherency, though, stems from the claim itself. It is the attempt to describe what we cannot know by reference to concepts that are supposedly being challenged: those everyday items whose existence, and so our knowledge of, we take for granted.

What holds true for the skeptic's attempt to peer into the unknowable also holds true for all of our plunges into the *unknown*. What the skeptic hoped was a threat to our knowledge claims shows itself to be an example of how the unknown becomes known: the realignment of familiar concepts in an attempt to apprehend something novel. While the unknowable is necessarily theoretical, the unknown becomes the empirically novel. There is no way to ascertain where the boundary may lie since our descriptions continuously expand. In this case, we can say that skepticism indirectly leads us to the universality of natural language.

## 5.2 Internalized triangulation and metaphor

I said earlier that Davidson does not provide for the progression of language. I should qualify this statement somewhat. In a passage from "Seeing Through Language" Davidson says this about perception and belief:

In the end, it is perceptions we have to go on, but on the basis of perceptions we build theories against which we evaluate further perceptions. I take for granted that the perceptual beliefs we cannot help forming, however tentatively, are themselves heavily conditioned by what we remember, by what we just a moment ago perceived, and by the relevant theories we have

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<sup>132</sup> This point should be credited to Erik Brown from his study of skepticism, *Is any variety of skepticism worth taking seriously?* Skriftserien NR.21 (Bergen, Filosofisk institutt, Universitet i Bergen, 2003) section 6h.

come to accept to one degree or another. Beyond the skin there is a mindless causality, but what gets bombarded is a thinking animal with a thoroughly conditioned apparatus. There is no simple relation between the stimulus and the thought.<sup>133</sup>

This is a description of what is happening when we encounter unknown factors. But it is not completely accurate to attribute a “mostly inscrutable complexity” to the relation as Davidson does in the sentence following the above quote. The *how* of the relation is available, no matter how complex it may be. But it becomes available only after a consideration of the instability of meaning in terms of metaphor and literal meaning such as the discussion in chapter 3.

The treatment of metaphor in chapter 3 served as a point of opposition for a certain understanding of literal meaning. It was in discussion of metaphor that Davidson represented claims for literal meaning that, upon consideration of the dynamics of prior and passing theories, could not hold up under scrutiny. Further, the view that the literal is the basis for meaning obscures how we could create new meaning in response to novel stimuli. There is a static quality to literal meaning so understood, a quality deeply embedded in the reified view of language we have argued against. If we only had the meanings we already have at our disposal, how could it be possible to speak of ‘discovery’ or ‘inquiry’?

We are in perception and in inquiry, alone. But as Davidson says, we are, each of us, “a thinking animal with a thoroughly conditioned apparatus.” Being alone is a banality since we are, in a meaningful way, the sum of our repertoire. The fact that we meet the world alone does not imply isolation. We cannot shed our personal histories nor pretend that we do not know anything. Our repertoire informs each perceptual event and provides the basis by which understanding is possible. These personal histories are the codified sets of agreement that comprise what we see as our language. We are never without ‘the language of the tribe’. But our language does not determine our perceptual events. We are in constant engagement with the ‘mindless causality’. To say more about this engagement is to discuss the *how* of these understandings, to confront the mechanism of an internalized triangulation.

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<sup>133</sup> Davidson, “Seeing Through Language,” 136

Internalized, Davidson's triangulation can seem as trivial as the recognition that snow is white. Even as a theoretical proper name, proposing interpretation would appear to be forcing the issue where there is no space for it. We do not need to build our understandings of our own beliefs on the basis of our assent to statements. We would, of course, already understand them if we were to assent. If the meanings of our thoughts were unclear, wouldn't we have to say that we weren't really thinking? The immediacy of our own thinking resists talk of process.

The usually unproblematic access to our own thoughts tends to obscure what is a complex shuffling of meaning. We get by with half formed thoughts on the background of habitual activity. Our everyday lives involve much that is akin to making the morning coffee or catching the bus at a quarter past nine: unproblematic, repetitive and fully absorbed patterns of behaviour and response. But this is only a part of the framework we act within, that part which is at one end of a conceptual scale, what I have called semantic availability. In other words, the expected stability of convention is also to be found within our personal understandings of the world.

We should, then, qualify the assumption of immediacy. Even within our own thinking, the relation of a scale of semantic difficulty is apparent. The application of this scale aids in the identification of just what it is that is going on. As within communication, the role of the conventional does not exhaust the whole of our individual interaction with the world. And as in conversation, triangulation in the form of radical interpretation only becomes apparent when difficulties arise. And when difficulties arise we are confronted with an internal dialog.

We need not make too much out of the idea of an internal dialog; the issue is that reflection on our own thoughts distances us from them in a manner that gives room for the concept of radical interpretation. Any given novel thought, for example, "Problematic experiences enable the identification of internal triangulation", demands an evaluation of whether or not that thought coheres with whatever else we believe. While Susan Haack holds that metaphor is not a semantic phenomenon, she notes in writing about metaphor and epistemology the same internal relation, speaking directly to our point:

in the inner dialogue of inquiry one plays the role both of speaker and of hearer, and one's metaphorical musings may invite one – as one's

metaphorical utterances invite others – to seek out the similarities between the *prima facie* disparate phenomena implicitly compared.<sup>134</sup>

The thought takes a position similar to the utterance of a conversation partner: the parts are seen in light of their positions in other beliefs, and an eventual meaning is solidified based on our assent or dissent to the proposition as a whole. This process can find itself anywhere on our scale between semantically available and radically interpretative; that position determining how automatic or interpretative it appears to us.

This can be seen, much as Haack does, as a re-description of what we normally call our reasoning or cognitive abilities. There is no reason not to see it as such. For our purposes it is important to see this everyday human activity in reference to a personal repertoire and in a scalar fashion. The seemingly problematic removal of the conversation partner does not intrinsically alter the relations between belief, meaning and truth that generate content within Davisonian triangulation. We must interpret ourselves when we suspect we are thinking nonsense just as when we suspect someone else of uttering it. Davidson's description of the competence of an interpreter is adequate also when we embody the roles of both speaker and interpreter while alone.

On an everyday level, we could assume that our confrontations with unexpected events or new ideas are relatively easily managed. Even in situations that show themselves to be problematic, the difficulties are temporary and involve mistakes rather than failings. If a part of the coffee machine was mislaid, for example, we must actively ask ourselves where we saw it last, but we do not engage in questioning the concept of 'coffee' or 'machine'. Our repertoires are comprehensive and familiar enough to handle (of course, and perhaps by definition) our daily lives. Even the sample statement above, about internal triangulation, involves well-known concepts though rearranging them in a novel way; this novelty is the common universality of natural language. But the discussion began with hopes

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<sup>134</sup> Haack, Susan, " 'Dry Truth And Real Knowledge': Epistemologies Of Metaphor And Metaphors of Epistemology", in *Aspects Of Metaphor*, ed. Jaakko Hintikka (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994) 15



for investigating what we do not know, so we need a more extreme example to approach the unknown.

With Haack, and in a more thoroughgoing sense of the creation of meaning, I suggest we consider scientific enquiry as a special case. In such situations we have the collection of elements we are exploring in their most rarified form. A researcher, armed with all the knowledge available to her, wishes to probe some aspect of the causal world. There is the presumption that the unknown will be encountered, being after all the goal of the enterprise. The relation is one of perception and, as such, necessarily solitary and personal.<sup>135</sup>

As Haack notes, “The initial conception of a theory is an individual matter, and the exploration, articulation, testing and modification of a theory may also be undertaken by an individual working alone.”<sup>136</sup> Without postulating that theories spring fully formed from singular events, there is necessarily to be found in their ‘initial conception’ such moments as are being described. The researcher is operating in a singular relation to the causal mindlessness of the world in the moment of perception, and with the hope that knowledge will ensue. And despite the intentionality of the activity, the mass of existing knowledge, or the familiarity of the process or tools involved, the intense familiarity of the everyday is left behind within the perceptual focus.

There is an expectation of meaning, that something will be learned. We can refer again to Rorty’s view that “Inquiry and justification are activities we language-users cannot help engaging in.”<sup>137</sup> In the perceptual moment, there will exist meaning. The very idea of perceiving without meaning, without understanding, is an absurdity. So we postulate that our scientist encounters a previously un-encountered phenomenon (x). One that no one before has described, so it can be called truly novel. The encountering is a perception, she sees the (x) as something, or rather that it is something. Our expectation is confirmed: “There is a new phenomenon!” What can it be, then?

In order to state that it exists requires that it is something, that it takes a content-full position in an ‘observation statement’ or ‘perceptual sentence’ (however

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<sup>135</sup> Perception should be understood throughout in the broadest sense: to perceive, to grasp, to understand, etc.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.* 14

<sup>137</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p 37

we wish to designate it). On the basis of the scientist's repertoire, (x) has taken a position in relation to other beliefs yielding a content that is its meaning: '(x) is such and such'. But phenomena do not wear nametags. We must supply the meaningful content. Since we can only know something on the basis of what we know, and (x) is truly novel, we can claim that the formulation of '(x) is such and such' begins with the nearest similar known belief answering to the field of inquiry plus something else. The something else is necessary, otherwise (x) would merely be that which the stimulated belief usually refers to. So (x) appears as a juxtaposition of various elements in the repertoire of the researcher.

That this is happening all the time is indisputable. The history of science provides almost infinite examples. Bohr's model of the atom, based on the known workings of the planets around the sun in our solar system is one. As is Bjerknes' weather front, a description of atmospheric pressure which came from the troop movements of World War I. The act of seeing atmospheric movements as fronts is a conceptual juxtaposition. These are well known examples of scientific metaphor, often discussed in a literary context. But it is the semantic context of perception that lies at the root of discovery. With a conceptual juxtaposition being present, there is no reason not to employ that term which has always been used for expressing such relations: metaphor.<sup>138</sup>

It is in the awareness of this semantic juxtaposition that the term metaphor first obtains. There is no implication here that our scientist is consciously going through any steps in this process. Not in the moment of perception in any case. Like the interpreter that knows no semantic theory, the researcher merely 'sees' that '(x) is such and such'. In the perceptual act awareness is automatic. And awareness is the instigation of meaning.

If we wish to expand the semantic example to include the scientist's reflective evaluation of what she has seen, the case for applying the term metaphor is only strengthened. And it is most reasonable to assume that a reflective process of justification and development does occur immediately following such a perceptual

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<sup>138</sup> In particular, the literary critic E. D. Hirsch has said very similar things about metaphor and novel creation, though there is no reason to believe he would agree with the presentation of metaphor in the context of radical interpretation. [see Hirsch, E. D., *Validity In Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) Ch. 3]

juxtaposition. Black, and those who have followed his lead, has written extensively on models in science and their metaphorical qualities. As in the examples of Bohr and Bjerknes, there is no reason not to see their theories, as Black puts it, “sustained and systematic metaphor.”<sup>139</sup> The emphasis that Black correctly places on this idea is that “they worked not *by* analogy, but *through* and by means of an underlying analogy. Their models were conceived to be more than expository or heuristic devices.”<sup>140</sup>

Our scientist thus has a belief and the composite meaning that is its content, but the need for justification illuminates the position of truth, or truth-value. ‘(x) is such and such’ has an undetermined or temporarily assigned truth-value. How well does the statement cohere with what the researcher knows? It must be at least somewhat unstable due to it not actually being a statement previously contained in her repertoire. If we consider what was earlier said about literal meaning and metaphor, we see that necessarily unstable position of (x) in the scientist’s frame of reference precludes semantic availability and demands a radically interpretative approach.

Making this argument for metaphorical grasp of the novel approaches a view of metaphor that is summarily dismissed by both Black and Davidson. Black terms it catachresis, “the use of a word in some new sense in order to remedy a gap in the vocabulary.”<sup>141</sup> Davidson, in “What Metaphors Mean,” says:

If we are to think of words in metaphors as directly going about their business of applying to what they properly do apply to, there is no difference between metaphor and the introduction of a new term in our vocabulary: to make a metaphor is to murder it.<sup>142</sup>

Well, we must say that when the researcher is satisfied with her own justification of ‘(x) is such and such’ that it becomes literal, in the sense of her being in agreement

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<sup>139</sup> Black, Max, “Models And Archetypes” in *Models and Metaphors: Studies In Language And Philosophy* (1962; reprint, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966) 236

<sup>140</sup> *ibid.* 229 (Black mentions Bohr, Kelvin and Rutherford in his text, Bjerknes is my example.)

<sup>141</sup> Black “Metaphor” 33

<sup>142</sup> Davidson “What Metaphors Mean,” *Inquiries Into Truth And Interpretation*, 248-49

with herself. But does this mean that what I term a metaphoric juxtaposition vanishes almost as soon as it is created? Perhaps to a limited degree, but only within the transitory literalness we have spoke of in chapter 3.

Any researcher will be convinced of her own results and will argue for them on the basis that they are true. But even though we has stretched the definition of literal meaning almost to the breaking point with the assertion that, “Every deviation from ordinary usage, as long as it is agreed upon for the moment, ... is... what the words mean on that occasion. Such meanings, transient though they may be, are literal,” we cannot escape the relation between literal and conventional on the basis of an interpreter’s conviction.

If ‘(x) is such and such’ is not contained in the repertoire of the next interpreter, it will retain, upon being communicated, an uncertain position in that interpreter’s frame of reference. There is no guarantee that it will be understood in the manner our scientist intended, nor if so understood, can it provide for similar determinations in the future. Nor is it certain that the scientist is not willing to evaluate her own commitment to ‘(x) is such and such’ within early communications of it. Ultimately it must go through the social process of language use that any metaphor must, from live to dead metaphor. It must have its truth-value solidified through repeated use and codification. Thus, the unknown becomes available for all of us. By first appearing in the individual’s perception as metaphor then being repeatedly communicated, repeatedly located and assigned a position within other individual’s repertoires on the path towards conventionality.

Thus there is no reason to agree with Black that “It is the fate of catachesis to disappear when it is successful.”<sup>143</sup> There is no doubt that metaphors do disappear into conventionality, but usually do so only after a hardening process. There will always be things that we have not thought of or encountered before, there will always be gaps in the languages we wield. It is the universality of natural language that requires metaphor due to our finite repertoires. As Quine has said, “Metaphor, or something like it, governs both the growth of language and our acquisition of it.

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<sup>143</sup> Black, *ibid.*

What comes as a subsequent refinement is rather cognitive discourse itself, at its most dryly literal.”<sup>144</sup>

### 5.3 Doubt and metaphor

By identifying this semantic mechanism, metaphoric juxtaposition, for how we come to know what no one knows, it is much more clear how the presented form for dealing with the skeptic leads to the incoherency of the refutation itself. It is that, in telling the skeptic to get lost, or thereby stipulating that we cannot speak of that we cannot speak of, a knowledge claim is smuggled in. This claim is that we can, in some way, know what we can or cannot speak of.

By enlarging the field of application of radical interpretation to explain the expansion of language, this claim is shown to be empty and so the arguments that contain it faulty. But only faulty up to a point, not wrong, or if we like, wrongheaded. In the manner that the global skeptic has generated an enormous amount of philosophical rumination, so has the deflationist approach allowed for further understanding. Davidson’s arguments for the veridical nature of belief do allow us to be secure in our understandings, though they fall short of ridding us of skeptical doubts.

As Wittgenstein questions in *On Certainty*, “Can one say: ‘Where there is no doubt there is no knowledge either?’”<sup>145</sup> In light of our discussion, we must answer this in the affirmative. The foundation of Davidson’s semantics is the realization of the doubt, “I could be wrong.” It would be foolish to assume that we discard such doubts after originally internalizing the concept of objective truth that is thus generated. We meet this doubt at all points of judgment. And as I maintain, the generalization of this concept leads to skeptical rumination.

We have also seen that an explanation of the progression of language within the terms of radical interpretation necessitates another, though related, type of doubt. The universality of natural language demands we plunge into the unknown with a

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<sup>144</sup> Quine, W. V. “A Postscript on Metaphor,” in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 160

<sup>145</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (1969; reprint, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001) 18e (§121)

limited tool set and no guarantee that it will prove adequate. This is the insecurity of unstable positions in a repertoire for understandings of novel stimuli. Another way of phrasing this is that we are not prepared to designate truth-value for the statements that appear with truly novel elements due to the instability of truth condition positioning. If we accept that knowledge expands through grasping the novel, as it must, and that we can only understand the novel on the basis of the accepted, then doubt as to the validity of our expressions of the novel is a structural necessity.

This doubt is also present at all points of engagement in one form or another and gives greater credence to the aggravations of the skeptic than merely the consideration of possible mistakes. But together, these doubts give expression to our actual limits. Not the limit of what we can or cannot speak about, but the dialectical necessity that requires we live within opposing and seemingly absolute perspectives. We cannot rid ourselves of the veridical relation to belief. We said that the global skeptic shows himself to be incoherent in the attempt. To truly do so would be the loss of language.

In the same way, the attempt to rid ourselves from doubt would be to lose our ability to discover in the activity of inquiry. Grasping the novel is incoherent without room for considerable doubt. This, I believe, is the understanding that lies behind Dummett's unhappiness with how he perceives the holistic constraint, he apparently has a feeling for insecurity as a partner in knowledge. Doubt, which skeptical claims can be extrapolated from, is an essential part of our language use. Without doubt there could be no knowledge since there could be no awareness of truth. And so the attempt to secure our knowledge would lead to a rejection of truth. This rejection would, as does the skeptic's proposed separation of belief and truth, also lead to the loss of language.

So it would seem that our answer to skeptical anxiety is a greater awareness of instability. That at the point of discovery we encounter doubt, not truth. While correct, this would be a misunderstanding of the conclusion. It is not the insecurity of metaphor that answers our fear that we may be getting it all wrong. It is the acceptance that even in the apparently best arena for realism, the discoveries of inquiry, we are dependent upon others for our conceptions of the world. Radical interpretation does not condemn us to rootless coherence, as this discussion of

semantic progression shows. It is this further reinforcement the social component to why belief is veridical that answers to our anxiety.

The only possible way of releasing the pressure of the built in insecurity of knowledge and language is to do what we do all the time: reassure each other that we are getting it right. Communication is the solution to the problem of language's very possibility, its universality. We are never without contact with both the 'language of the tribe' and the 'mindless causality' of the world. Language as a social activity should be seen in the strong sense: we are social creatures who depend on each other for our survival in our contact with the world. There is no asymmetry between 'social' in regards to survival and 'social' in regards to language. The confirmations of meaning inherent in the theory of radical interpretation grant us the ability to keep going on in the same way in the face of our human limitations.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

There remains much to be written about the issues I have raised in this study. In concluding I would like to comment briefly on what it is I believe I have said and relate the theoretical presentation to the problem of argumentative discourse that framed the introduction. What I manage to leave out in no way signifies the relative interest of that material. There is, unfortunately, always too much to say.

To employ one of his own phrases, Donald Davidson has succeeded in giving us a general picture of our knowledge. The holism and dynamism of his truth conditional semantics contain powerful explanatory possibilities for understanding what it is we are doing when we communicate. Perhaps even more vital is the possibility for expanding that analysis into areas Davidson did not study. In order to successfully say that radical interpretation can serve as a theory of meaning would be to, at the very least, show how it could account for the acquisition and progression of language.

I have argued in this thesis that this requires something like a general picture of doubt. The dynamics of exchange and comprehension that define our linguistic encounters demand a negative space to function. The security that interpersonal communication gives us can only be understood against the background of considerable doubt. We thus acquire bundled with our ability to communicate, the necessity of instabilities such as skepticism, indeterminacy and metaphor.

It is metaphor which typifies the full universal quality of natural language. By having only what we know to rely upon in attempting to grasp the unknown, something like metaphor must obtain. Novel truth conditions are determined and our ontologies and theoretical explanations amount to much more than “variations on old themes.” Showing that this can be theoretically explained through Davidson’s truth conditional semantics is an answer to those who see such attempts as a reduction of the wealth of our language use. Appreciating instability as a necessary background for meaning opens a field of research that is rich with descriptive possibility.

The promise of this approach stretches beyond just theoretical satisfaction. At all points of learning the individual must confront something similar to the work environment of the researcher, the unknown. It is doubtful that for most of us this



unknown is commonly as extreme as our example of the scientist, but a difference in degree does not necessitate a difference in kind. The process is the same. As individuals, learning and expanding our knowledge, we do not always have the desire or ability to take on the basis of authority alone the descriptions presented to us. And even when we do, there is still a cognitive imperative to understand what we are learning; we must find positions for previously unknown facts, relations and theories. The mechanism described to explain how we come to know the unknown should be generalized to account for all of our learning, perhaps thus describing the generation of repertoires and truth theories.

This would require much more to be done for an analysis of metaphor specifically, and generally, for all other forms of what I term unstable elements of language. While I have worked with a definition of literal meaning that serves to illuminate functioning instability in determining meaning, I have not defined metaphor. I have expressly distanced what is a mechanism of our understanding from what is an intentional use of language. I believe metaphor is deeply involved with semantic acquisition, but I am in no way confident that this exhausts the concept of metaphor, even if only seen in the pre-reflective manner I discuss. Merely a short review of the literature on metaphor theory easily makes one doubt there is any easy formulation.

Within this mass of literature are many similarities to what I have been attempting to detail. Linguists, philosophers, psychologists, educators and literary theorists all have something to say about metaphor and related linguistic categories. Generally, it appears that a truth conditional approach is argued against with support from the types of relations I have been employing. Or, conversely, the dynamism and instability in radical interpretation does not cohere with the idea of metaphor as a generative relation. Ultimately, the literature would benefit from a comprehensive survey of concepts such as 'semantic' or 'use' and how to best clarify the difference, as well as a firm separation of the distinction I have been making between intentional and non-intentional appearance of metaphor.

What is clear, though, for deciding on a way forward through the forest of theory is that reduction is not satisfactory. This is apparent when we come to realize that neither a theory of metaphor nor a theory of literal meaning reviewed in isolation will serve the purposes they are supposedly designed for. Since they take their

definitions from interplay with each other, any comprehensive theoretical approach must look towards this dynamic relationship. What is being accomplished at every moment within language use is rich mutual appreciation of meaning. If we make sure our theoretical approaches remain descriptive, and not prescriptive, we have a possibility of positively encompassing a large part of what it is to be human. It is the possibility of taking advantage of Cohen's invitation.

Where then have we left the realist? The promise of this study was to tread the boundary of the unknown in an attempt to reconcile realist intuitions with philosophical theorizing which, I assert, claims "Where we expect confirmation from the physical world for our beliefs and ascription of truth, we find instead the dynamism of interpretation and interpersonal communication." This reconciliation would have to be based on a view of the progression of language that cohered with Rorty's statement: "We never understand anything except under a description, and there are no privileged descriptions." I believe Davidson's radical interpretation has been shown to be able to accomplish this. While Davidson accepts the normativity of all language use, since it based on a network of reasons, propositions and logical relations, reason itself springs from the concept of objective truth.

This view of truth does not make him a realist. We do not lose truth nor strive to attain it. For Davidson, "The importance of the concept of truth is rather its role in understanding, describing, and explaining the thought and talk of rational creatures."<sup>146</sup> It does not directly connect to explicitly expressed "norms of responsibility, trustworthiness, morality."<sup>147</sup> The development of radical interpretation is a more secure footing for a thoroughgoing humanism than are normative prescriptions to respect the truth, play nice or be more literate.

A rational argument should be able to have more effect than such commands. Through rational argument and theory Davidson provides an alternative to the type of rhetoric that proves divisive by depending on too much on such norms. Contrary to the misunderstanding that the principle of charity is such a normative imperative, radical interpretation is involved with the necessary conditions of communication. It is at the end of the day, a descriptive theory.

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<sup>146</sup> Davidson, "Appendix," *Truth, Language, and History*, 322

<sup>147</sup> *ibid.* 318

But there is a normative imperative at the root of solving the type of problem that Alan Sokal and Paul Boghossian, among others, say we suffer from: that modern philosophy is irrational and dismissive of the realist necessities of truth. This imperative is the demand that we desire to communicate. Perhaps this sounds equally as silly as the suggestion that we play nice, but it is not. This is what is assumed in appeals for reasoned argument or clarity. This is just what the realist is accusing the irrational philosopher of, rejecting reasoned argument and clarity thus having no desire to communicate.

I offer that, if this imperative is adhered to we must then begin to accept the Davidsonian commitments that radical interpretation illuminate. This serves to cancel the charge of irrationality and demands we utilize the understanding we are already involved in. This is to reiterate the arguments that were said to apply to the skeptic. The realistically inclined cannot level a charge of irrationality while maintaining a semantic comprehension of the utterances of the questionable philosopher. They are not speaking semantic nonsense, and colloquial nonsense should be seen as requiring further attempts at comprehension.

Thus, the accusation of irrationality must really mean that what is being said is unacceptable. That these ideas, or the rhetorical presentation of them, will not cohere with what the realist believes. We can see it this way, but then one cannot claim that they wish to engage in serious discussion. The theories and perspectives of language's primary role in our thinking and perception provide for all the reasonable argument one could wish for, so long as they truly wish to communicate. Davidson is a perfect example of this. Otherwise the charge of irrationality is the verbal equivalent of sticking fingers in your ears and singing to avoid hearing unpleasanties.

Forgetting that this applies to all conversation partners is a danger we all face. We are invested in what we believe, by the very nature of belief. Its veridical nature tempts us to trust in the Great Man theory of knowledge; that if resourceful enough, we could extract the truth from Nature herself. But no matter how much we wish to claim that truth is the goal of inquiry, it is obvious that what we return with is doubt. Truth, in the form of the confirmations of our honest and continual communication, is the balm with which to sooth the instability of what we know. Truth then, is the basis for hope and community, not an obstacle to it. Realizing this requires of us just a minimal humility: not forgetting that "I could be wrong."



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